

Letter: LTWC says thank you

To the community,

On behalf of our present board of directors, our past board members, all of our volunteers and all of the wildlife Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care has cared for in the past 40 years, I would like to say "thank you" to all those people who showed up last Sunday when we celebrated the 40th anniversary.

We had a very nice turnout from the community at Revive Coffee and Wine starting at 2pm and we recognized those people who have served and are serving on our board since 1978. In addition, we recognized the various agencies who have been our partners, including, but not limited to, city of SLT Police, El Dorado County Animal Control, El Dorado County Sheriff, Douglas County Sheriff, California Highway Patrol and California Department of Fish and Wildlife (formerly Game).

The weather was cool, but dry and it was just a very nice time for like-minded people to sit and talk about friendships, wildlife problems (and solutions) they have encountered over the years and to help celebrate 40 years of this organization which started with the idea of "Giving Mother Nature a Helping Hand!"

Tom Millham, secretary and co-founder Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care

Opinion: Not all EDC candidates are equal

By Larry Weitzman

Our form of government would work much better if the people in it were not so self-serving. Most politicians (and bureaucrats) fall into this category, thinking or saying anything to get elected, whether factual or not. That is the case with two of the candidates on the current ballot, Mike Owen and Norma Santiago, who have made statements that are absolute poppy-cock.

It was April 30, at the weekly morning meeting of the Taxpayers Association of El Dorado County. Maybe 7:30am was too early for one of the candidates both of whom were CPAs running for the El Dorado County elected position of auditor-controller. One candidate was the current auditor-controller, Joe Harn, who first won election in 1994 and the other candidate was Mike Owen.



Larry Weitzman

While I am not a CPA, I did earn a degree in accounting from the UCLA School of Business and during undergraduate and graduate school worked as a “junior” accountant for several CPAs and know their “psyche.” All the CPAs I knew were always accurate and precise when talking about numbers. In obtaining financial information from the current auditor for many of my columns, Harn’s information was always extremely precise and accurate.

It was midway into their opening statements when Owen made my jaw drop when he started becoming fast and loose with El Dorado County numbers (like I wrote above, maybe it was too early for Owen). Owen said that there was about a \$250 million

General Fund budget for our county government. Actually, the General Fund portion is a bit more, but close enough for government work. But according to our competent CAO the discretionary part is only about \$150 million. Then Owen said by paying vendor bills early (and taking early pay discounts or negotiating vendors bills down with early payment) he could save the county 10 percent with those discounts or about \$25 million annually. If accounting was plumbing, it would be called a "pipe dream."

Taking discounts for early pay in some cases could add up to 10 percent or more on an annualized basis. But many if not almost all vendors don't offer terms like that as it is an expensive form of financing and competition has reduced profit margins. On top of that, many of county purchases are made with credit cards. But that's not the real rub here.

Anyone running for office should know something about the "County Fisc," especially a CPA or someone running for a countywide financial position. It's obvious Owen knows next to nothing, CPA credential or not. Of our \$250 million plus county General Fund budget, about \$150 million as above is discretionary and of that about \$100 million is salary and benefits. No employee in the county is giving any discount on their paychecks. That means the discretionary, non-salary and benefits portion is about \$50 million. If anyone could get early pay discounts on even half of that number it would amount to a \$2.5 million savings, not \$25 million as Owen claimed. But that wouldn't be possible either.

In this era of cheap interest rates, discounts are unlikely as contracts are done by bidding or by request for proposals (RFPs) and are negotiated before services and products are purchased. On top of that many county purchases are made through "buying groups" that get large, pre-negotiated discounts. There are no significant or substantial early pay discounts available, leaving the amount of early discount payables possible as negligible, effectively zip, zero, nada.

Owen has claimed that the county doesn't pay its bills on time of which he has produced no evidence of any such occurrence. However, recent El Dorado County filings on Owen's alleged "successful" businesses of Crystal Basin Cellars showed two of several unpaid property tax bills as demonstrated by the filing of two certificate of lien for unsecured property tax. Why the tax liens? Maybe Owen doesn't pay his bills on time. Maybe his businesses are not so "successful." Owen has even been penalized for late campaign filing requirements. Why? He didn't pay these bills on time, too? Even Owen's CPA license was delinquent for non-payment of licensing fees during which time it was unlawful to identify himself as a CPA, which Owen did notwithstanding him not having a valid license. As to the claim of Crystal Basin Cellars and businesses being successful, Owen, who is a partner, should produce the financial records, but that might prove embarrassing. Maybe Owen needs this "job."

Owen has some other ethical dings such as being fined at least \$600 by the Fair Political Practices Commission.

Santiago has other issues the first being her statement saying Don Ashton is doing a great job (he is) and that "Terry Daly also performed well." Though Daly was accused of costing the county a lot of money, Santiago defended her, highlighting Daly's belief in "investing wisely while remaining fiscally conservative." There is an oxymoron. Daly gave away the county store in her 15 percent countywide pay raise recommendation which the Board of Supervisors blindly followed (Santiago voted for it). It has already cost the county upwards of \$100 million when you factor in pension benefits.

Her love of Daly may also extend to the fact that Daly, in violation of her severance agreement, wrote a written declaration with the Superior Court saying Santiago was entitled to back pay in Santiago's and ex-supervisor Ron Briggs lawsuit against the county for back pay. Any second-year law student could have told her that her suit was without

merit and barred by the language of the California Constitution. I wrote at least two columns with respect to the lawsuit and explaining why the suit was without merit. As to the other candidates running for District 5, I have no opinion as your choices are slim, maybe a write-in might be a better choice.

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Letter: LT Humane Society revamping its focus

To the community,

The Lake Tahoe Humane Society board of directors continues to be humbled by the outpouring of compassionate support from volunteers, businesses, agencies, and sponsors as part of our Restart, Rebuild, Restore, and Re-engage plan. Your contributions whether through your time, recommendations, partnerships, and/or monetary contributions, are essential to uniting us as a bonded community to create a safer future for the animals of Lake Tahoe.

Our core focus is to square things up financially, build alliances and partnerships, and restore services to the Lake Tahoe community – through intensive and compliant stewardship.

First 30 days

As a new board, we hit the ground running on April 21 and restarted with a lot of rigor around the process of discovery to determine what we were working with. We have reviewed thousands of files, emails and documents, and spent countless

hours assessing priorities. We have initiated background checks, which were never required by previous boards, signed conflict of interest documents, changed account numbers, and implemented safeguards around our financials. We are grateful for the team of incredible professionals at El Dorado Savings, who have shepherded us through this process.

Of high importance, and through robust efforts, we are working to rebuild the reputation and capabilities of the Lake Tahoe Humane Society through numerous compliance activities and achieving recognition as a reputable organization for donors. Of immediate importance, the organization has achieved the 2018 gold seal of transparency through GuideStar, which demonstrates our commitment to nonprofit transparency. This agency tracks and reports on the compliance of all nonprofits nationally and is a level of certification not previously held by the organization. We continue to pursue and strive for the Better Business Bureau compliance certification and will provide a status on this endeavor shortly. As a new board of directors, we recognize the importance of, and are committed to, building trust, confidence, and transparency with our community.

As we forge ahead on our journey of restorative actions, we launched the Paws for the Cause giving campaign on May 11. Although donations have been minimal, we are optimistic about the future. We invite supporters to contribute no matter the amount. Whether it helps now, or in the future, your contribution is extremely valued and is helping to cover legacy veterinary services delivered to the public.

After examining many financial documents, processes, and expenditures, we identified key indicators for the next logical steps to maintain financial health of the organization. In our evaluation, one of the options we must seriously consider is sale of the property. The board has begun the process to prepare the property for potential sale and are open to speaking with interested parties. This is not

a decision we will take lightly but as we look at the financial situation, the sale of the property and liquidation of other assets will allow us to: Pay off existing debts; reduce significant operating expenses; restore a baseline budget that we can allocate to programs; and rebuild services in the community much faster. In reality, the Lake Tahoe Humane Society does not need the building to operate. The foundation for the organization itself is in the volunteerism and programming.

The original purpose of the building's purchase was a long-term goal of opening up a large scale rescue, care, and adoption facility in the city of South Lake Tahoe that would physically house animals. With the current financial situation, although that is a wonderful goal, it is not a reality at this time. The main goal for us is to keep the organization operating and restore programming. Sometime in the distant future, once the organization is back on solid ground, there may be an opportunity to achieve that dream.

We have been afforded with many re-engagement opportunities. We have hosted two clean-up days at the 884 Emerald Bay Road facility, where we had tremendous support from the city of South Lake Tahoe, South Tahoe Refuse, Clean Tahoe Program, California Conservation Corps, Tracy Sheldon and the countless volunteers who showed to help make this happen. As a result, we are hosting a yard sale on June 2 and invite the community to come and support through purchases and/or donations as we embark on the re-imagination and transformation phases of the organization. We will be accepting cash and credit cards.

The Tahoe Chamber has been incredible in helping to champion us through this transformative process and has offered many resources to help us. Look for more activities in the near future. We were incredibly grateful for the financial contribution from the Junior Soroptimist bake sale! Well done, and what a shining example of incredible leadership from our children in the community. Additionally, other businesses like

Fire & Ice, Casey's, Lake Tahoe Golf Course, and Live at Lakeview have partnered with us to offer events where proceeds will help benefit the organization and restore services. If you are a business who would like to partner to help support our restoration efforts, please send an email to info@laketahoehumanesociety.org

We thank Alpine Animal Hospital, Sierra Veterinary Hospital, Round Hill Animal Hospital, Lake Tahoe TV, and all of the businesses that have been impacted in the past and now, for your incredible patience and willingness to work with us as we engineer a plan to properly compensate you as quickly as possible. We want to restore services quickly so that we can partner together to help promote the health of all animals in Lake Tahoe.

We can't thank our media enough for helping to drive awareness of our efforts. Our incredible gratitude goes out to: the *Tahoe Tribune*, *South Tahoe Now*, *Tahoe Mountain News*, *Lake Tahoe News*, KNTV and KOLQ news crews for your partnership with us. We could not have the reach that we have had without you.

The board will continue to forge ahead with our simplification, consolidation, and financial health efforts to help us optimize our operational efficiencies and restorative practices. We will close on the Restart, Rebuild, Restore, and Re-engage planning efforts and build on what we were able to achieve here in the form of re-imagining and transforming our organization into something that our community will value and benefit from again.

We thank you for your continued support. Please refer to the TransPAWrency document for any questions that you may have. We will update this document with new information as it becomes available.

With incredible gratitude,

Chantale Hansen, vice president operations Lake Tahoe Humane

Opinion: Additional sales tax in Calif. is wrong

By Ted Gaines

California might end the fiscal year with a whopping \$20 billion in its rainy day fund. You might think a reserve that size, plus billions more in unanticipated revenue flowing into the state's coffers this year, would satisfy even the tax-hungriest Sacramento politicians and satisfy their appetite for tax increases. Sadly, you would be wrong. Even during this tax boom, Senate Bill 993 is trying to slap taxpayers with the single biggest sales tax increase in state history.



Ted Gaines

Currently, Californians don't pay taxes on services, but SB993 would change that. Next time you visit a dry cleaner, hair stylist, manicurist, mechanic or any of the other countless services that we use day after day, week after week, you'll pay a new and additional 3 percent tax for the exact same service. That's the last thing financially-stretched Californians need in this already unaffordable state. And history is clear that the 3 percent tax will only creep up

over time.

The damage wouldn't stop there. Small businesses contract out myriad tasks so they can focus on their core money making activity. They pay for computer services, payroll, janitorial, bookkeeping, legal services and more. Under this bill, they will be paying a premium for those services. This additional cost puts them at a further disadvantage to their larger competitors, who have staff to perform these services in house, and they will have no choice but to pass those new costs on to consumers, shrink already thin margins, or go out of business completely.

By taxing businesses for services provided during multiple stages of production, this tax will be added on to the final costs of every product we use, including prescription drugs, milk, bread and other staples that are exempt from any sales tax. Although they will not be taxed directly, everyone – even the state's poorest citizens – will be paying a backdoor tax on the products they depend on.

In true California fashion, the plan envisioned in SB993 is wildly complicated, with a maze of exemptions and allocation decisions that make the bill not just a bad idea, but an unworkable one. It's estimated that first-year administrative costs for the state would be around \$900 million, settling towards \$600 million annually afterwards. Good taxation should be simple, and the convoluted scheme embodied in the bill violates that core principle.

A tax on services will spread over the California economy like a Kilauea lava flow, slowly destroying opportunity, prosperity, and the bottom line of family budgets. It could lead to a short-term bump in revenue, but would further damage California's faltering economic competitiveness and corrode our long-term financial health. That's a price none of us should be willing to pay.

State Sen. Ted Gaines represents the 1st Senate District, which includes all or parts of Alpine, El Dorado, Lassen, Modoc, Nevada, Placer, Plumas, Sacramento, Shasta, Sierra and Siskiyou counties.

Letter: Barton folks spend evening at B&B

To the community,

Bread & Broth was very excited to have members of Barton Hospital's dietitian department sponsor the Monday meal on May 14.

So many departments from Barton Hospital host Adopt A Day of Nourishments and they always send wonderful sponsor crew members to help at their sponsorship dinners. True to form, the five Barton volunteers, Rebecca Espinel, Jessica Keys, Lynn Norton, Kristine Travis and Jennifer Trew, were a joy to work with.

"It was a pleasure to serve members of our community," said Keys. "We were amazed to see how much fresh produce was given to the dinner guests."

B&B is thrilled to have our "Green Goal" program recognized by professional dietitians. While the majority of the meal costs are covered by the \$300 donation of the sponsoring AAD group, B&B uses funds donated to our general fund to purchase fresh fruit and vegetables and dairy products (milk, eggs and butter), to add healthy food to the giveaway bags that our dinner guest can take home for use later in the week.

B&B appreciates the support that we receive from Barton Hospital departments and team members. Their devotion to helping people does not end at the close of their work shift as demonstrated by the Barton dietitians help funding and serving a hot, nutritious meal to those in need in our community.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: Importance of being bear aware

By Lisa Herron

Lake Tahoe agencies remind residents and visitors to practice proper food storage and trash disposal at all times while in bear country. Intentional or unintentional feeding of bears can result in the bear being killed, fines and/or jail time for violators.

Every year law enforcement and state wildlife officers respond to hundreds of calls in which bears may pose a public safety threat and/or are damaging property. In some cases, the animals are euthanized. Become part of the solution and help us save our Tahoe bears.

“The Nevada Department of Wildlife appreciates the interagency efforts throughout the Tahoe basin to help keep bears wild and where they belong,” said NDOW bear biologist Heather Reich. “Consistent and informative messaging is something we can all contribute to help residents and visitors be more responsible in bear country.”

The Tahoe basin is a spectacular place to live and attracts millions of outdoor recreationists each year. It is also prime bear habitat with an estimated population of 10,000 to 15,000 American black bears living in the Sierra Nevada. With the onset of warmer weather conditions, bears are beginning to leave their winter dens in search of food. When bears emerge from hibernation, they are extraordinarily hungry and must eat to make up for calories lost during winter. As more people live and frequent bear country, an abundance of unnatural food sources become available to bears. Bears are attracted to anything scented and/or edible. Improperly stored food and garbage are temptations few bears can resist.

Once bears gain access to human food or trash, they will continue to seek it out. They become less cautious of people and may display bold behavior when trying to get to human food. Bears that have become indifferent to the presence of people and have access to human food sources may cause property damage and threaten public safety. Residents and visitors can help keep our bears wild and reduce potential conflicts between bears and humans by acting responsibly while in bear country and properly storing food and trash.

At Forest Service campgrounds in the Lake Tahoe Basin, visitors are required to store food in bear-resistant containers (storage lockers/bear boxes), dispose of trash in dumpsters and close and lock these containers or risk fines, jail time, or both.

California state law prohibits the feeding of any big game mammal and proper food storage is also required by law in California State Parks. Food, beverages, scented items or ice chests left unattended will be confiscated and a citation will be issued. Visitors that violate these rules may be ejected from the park. All counties in Nevada that border Lake Tahoe have ordinances in place prohibiting residents from allowing wildlife access to garbage. Citations and fines can be issued for code violations.

The following are tips for safe-guarding homes, long-term rentals, vacation home rentals or timeshares (if permitted by home or property owner):

- Never feed wildlife. This attracts predators to homes and properties and perpetuates nuisance wildlife activity.
- Purchase, store all trash in, and properly close bear-resistant garbage containers, preferably bear boxes. Inquire with local refuse companies about new bear box incentives and payment programs or go **online** and/or **here** for more information.
- Never leave groceries, animal feed, or anything scented in vehicles. Bears can open vehicle doors and they may cause damage trying to gain entrance if there are scented items inside.
- Keep barbecue grills clean and stored in a garage or shed when not in use.
- Keep doors and windows closed and locked when the home is unoccupied.
- Vegetable gardens, compost piles, orchards and chickens may attract bears. Use electric fences to keep bears out where allowed. Refrain from hanging bird feeders.
- If neighborhoods experience bear activity, consider using electric doormats and/or electric fencing on windows and/or doors where allowed. Electrified windows and doors should have signs posted for safety and to alert the public and emergency personnel. Contact local vendors and installers for appropriate products and instructions and/or go **online** for more information.
- If a bear breaks into your home, do not confront the bear. Give the bear space and move away so the bear can find

an escape route.

Tips for safe-guarding campsites against bear encounters:

- Never feed wildlife.
- Always store food (including pet food), drinks, toiletries, coolers, cleaned grills, cleaned dishes, cleaning products, and all other scented items in the bear-resistant containers (storage lockers/bear boxes) provided at campsites.
- Clean the barbecue grill after each use and store properly.
- Always place trash in bear-resistant dumpsters in campgrounds or in bear-resistant containers at campsites (storage lockers/bear boxes), and close and lock after each use.
- Never leave scented items unattended in campsites, tents, or vehicles. Bears can open vehicle doors and they may cause damage trying to gain entrance if there are scented items inside.
- Never leave trash at campsites.

Tips for hikers and backpackers:

- Hike in groups and keep an eye on small children.
- Please keep dogs on leash. Off leash, dogs can alarm and/or aggravate bears and bring the bear back to you.
- Watch for signs of bears, such as bear scat along trails or claw marks on trees, and stay alert. Make noise while on trails so that bears are aware of human presence and can avoid you.
- Never approach bears or cubs. Always, keep a safe distance.

• Store food in bear-resistant food storage canisters while recreating in the backcountry.

To report human-bear conflicts in California, contact California Department of Fish and Wildlife's Northern California dispatch at 916.445.0380. Non-emergency negative wildlife interactions in California State Parks can be reported to their public dispatch at 916.358.1300. To report human-bear conflicts in Nevada, contact Nevada Department of Wildlife at 775.688.2327. If the issue is an immediate threat, call the local sheriff's department or 911.

This collaborative agency effort includes California State Parks (CSP), California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW), El Dorado County Sheriff's Department (EDSO), Nevada Department of Wildlife (NDOW), Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), and U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU).

Lisa Herron works for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Letter: STHS, WHS boosters say thanks

To the community,

The South Tahoe and Whittell High schools boosters clubs would like to express our sincere gratitude to the sponsors, players and volunteers at this year's Boosters Golf Tournament. We'd especially like to thank Edgewood for their continued support for our cause – this year was our 31st year – and once again they allowed us to use their gorgeous course, snack shack, carts, staff, and club house at no charge so that we can host

this amazing event.

This was our best year ever with net revenue of \$42,000 which is split between both schools. This money helps to fund sports and supplementary education programs for our local schools.

Thank you and we hope to see you all next year!

Sincerely,

Kindle Craig, South Tahoe High School Boosters & Whittell High School Boosters

Letter: Kirkwood workers help serve food

To the community,

Every Monday of the year, the Bread & Broth volunteers collect donated food, setup a dining area in St. Theresa Hall, prepare and cook a tasty full-course meal, setup a dessert and drink area, and pack food giveaway bags for the 65 to 100 dinner guests who show up for a free meal to which everyone in the community is invited to attend.

These wonderful meals are hosted by Adopt A Day of Nourishment sponsors who not only financially help cover the costs of the dinner, but also send sponsor crew members who work alongside of the B&B volunteers to prepare the community dinner.

On May 7, thanks to Vail EpicPromise grant funding, Kirkwood Mountain Resort was the Adopt A Day sponsor for the evening and a wonderful crew consisting of Nate Hyden, Anthony Jones, Christian Neville and Rebecca Tholl enthusiastically joined

the B&B volunteers for three hours to help with the evening's preparation and takedown.

"Thank you for the unforgettable experience," exclaimed Tholl. "We were able to be a small part of joy in the lives of many, including ours."

What a great attitude this Kirkwood crew brought to the dinner and it was so much appreciated by the dinner guests and B&B volunteers. B&B is so thankful for the support that is provided by our local Kirkwood Mountain Resort and its stalwart sponsor volunteers.

B&B also has a soup and simple entree meal service on Fridays, Second Serving, at Lake Tahoe Community Presbyterian Church to which everyone in the community is welcome.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: Caltrans work hurting Tahoe businesses

By Bruce Grego

Years ago, we, in South Lake Tahoe, could look forward to summer. Nowadays, we can look "forward" to Caltrans construction season on Highway 50.

The construction activity that continues for still another year on Highway 50, regarding the installation of drainage and sidewalks, is disruptive to small businesses. I realize that you can't make an omelette without breaking some eggs, but to have Caltrans conduct all summer construction activities on our principal roadway is not acceptable.



Bruce Grego

As an example, part of Highway 50's lanes were closed off (last week) between Tahoe Keys Boulevard and Sierra Boulevard and traffic was reduced to one lane traveling east. Traffic not only backed up on Highway 50, but also Tahoe Keys Boulevard and Third Street. The summer traffic hasn't even started. Also, at 5:06pm that day, the crew stopped working.

Last fall, Councilmember Tom Davis invited me to attend a meeting with Caltrans in the city manager's office, where we discussed the problems that developed the previous summer. It seemed, to me, that Caltrans was, at least, listening to our concerns. But, as this season develops, no changes have occurred. One of the promises made was that the center turning lane would be used to replace the left lane during construction. This suggestion alone would alleviate many of the concerns and reduce the impact upon small business by allowing the free flow of traffic. But, so far, this proposal has not been implemented by Caltrans.

Presently, the contractor, working for Caltrans, is busy tearing up our highway for the next section of work. Even though there were cones running from the Tahoe Keys intersection to Sierra Boulevard, I counted only seven employees working on this section. Really! One way to reduce the impact of this construction is to have a greater number of construction personnel working on the project.

In the last few years, we have seen the same pattern of sparse construction activity affecting the use of our highway. Only in the last weeks of the season, after the first snows and

before winter actually begins, does the contractor add additional personnel to complete the work for that season. This methodology is not acceptable, but it proves that construction can proceed more quickly, if the contractor so chooses.

When you consider the fact that Caltrans will soon begin work on the roundabout near the bus station in Meyers, and then the reconstruction of the Echo Summit bridge in 2019, which will close traffic for an entire summer or more, what exactly should small businesses expect to do during these periods? You don't have to conduct a study to know that the majority of businesses in this town earn their money from Memorial Day to Labor Day. We have Caltrans continuing to interfere with this business season to the significant detriment of everyone.

Where is local government protecting our interests? We do not have to accept the status quo. If we have the will, we can change Caltrans' mythology. Our council can call for a special meeting if they want and discuss openly with Caltrans the need to change. Our council can open a dialogue with our state representative and demand action. The contract between Caltrans and the contractor can be examined to assure full timely performance. If Caltrans doesn't get it, or doesn't care, then maybe more formal action brought by local government needs to be pursued. But the first thing local government has to declare is that the present system of construction on our highway is not acceptable. If they can pass legislation concerning plastic straws, why can't we do more in protecting the business community that supports our workers and of course pay the taxes that support local government. The time to act is now.

Bruce Grego is a resident of South Lake Tahoe and former council member.

Opinion: Is bigger really better?

By Alexandra Staub, The Conversation

The United States is facing a housing crisis: Affordable housing is inadequate, while luxury homes abound. Homelessness remains a persistent problem in many areas of the country.

Despite this, popular culture has often focused on housing as an opportunity for upward mobility: the American Dream wrapped within four walls and a roof. The housing industry has contributed to this belief as it has promoted ideals of “living better.” Happiness is marketed as living with both more space and more amenities.

As an architect and scholar who examines how we shape buildings and how they shape us, I’ve examined the trend toward “more is better” in housing. Opulent housing is promoted as a reward for hard work and diligence, turning housing from a basic necessity into an aspirational product.

Yet what are the ethical consequences of such aspirational dreams? Is there a point where “more is better” creates an ethical dilemma?

The better housing craze

The average single-family home built in the United States in the 1960s or before was less than 1,500 square feet in size. By 2016, the median size of a new, single-family home sold in the United States was 2,422 square feet, almost twice as large.

Single-family homes built in the 1980s had a median of six

rooms. By 2000, the median number of rooms was seven. What's more, homes built in the 2000s were more likely than earlier models to have more of all types of spaces: bedrooms, bathrooms, living rooms, family rooms, dining rooms, dens, recreation rooms, utility rooms and, as the number of cars per family increased, garages.

Today, home building companies promote these expanding spaces – large yards, spaces for entertainment, private swimming pools, or even home theaters – as needed for recreation and social events.

Each home a castle?

Living better is not only defined as having more space, but also as having more and newer products. Since at least the 1920s, when the “servant crisis” forced the mistress of the house to take on tasks servants had once performed, marketing efforts have suggested that increasing the range of products and amenities in our home will make housework easier and family life more pleasant. The scale of such products has only increased over time.

In the 1920s, advertising suggested that middle-class women who had once had servants to do their more odious housework could now, with the right cleaners, be able to easily do the job themselves.

By the 1950s, advertisements touted coordinated kitchens as allowing women to save time on their housework, so they could spend more time with their families. More recently, advertisers have presented the house itself as a product that will improve the family's social standing while providing ample space for family activities and togetherness for the parent couple, all the while remaining easy to maintain. The implication has been that even if our houses get larger, we won't need to spend more effort running them.

In my research, I note that the housework shown – cooking,

doing laundry, helping children with their homework – is presented as an opportunity for social engagement or family bonding.

Advertisements never mentioned that more bathrooms also mean more toilets to scrub, or that having a large yard with a pool for the kids and their friends means hours of upkeep.

The consequences of living big

As middle-class houses have grown ever larger, two things have happened.

First, large houses do take time to maintain. An army of cleaners and other service workers, many of them working for minimal wages, are required to keep the upscale houses in order. In some ways, we have returned to the era of even middle-class households employing low-wage servants, except that today's servants no longer live with their employers, but are deployed by firms that provide little in the way of wages or benefits.

Second, once-public spaces such as municipal pools or recreational centers, where people from diverse backgrounds used to randomly come together, have increasingly become privatized, allowing access only to carefully circumscribed groups. Even spaces that seem public are often exclusively for the use of limited populations. For example, gated communities sometimes use taxpayer funds – money that by definition should fund projects open to the public – to build amenities such as roads, parks or playgrounds that may only be used by residents of the gated community or their guests.

Limiting access to amenities has had other consequences as well. An increase in private facilities for the well-off has gone hand in hand with a reduction of public facilities available to all, with a reduced quality of life for many.

Take swimming pools. Whereas in 1950, only 2,500 U.S. families

owned in-ground pools, by 1999 this number had risen to 4 million. At the same time, public municipal pools were often no longer maintained and many were shuttered, leaving low-income people nowhere to swim.

Mobility opportunities have been affected, too. For example, 65 percent of communities built in the 1960s or earlier had public transportation; by 2005, with an increase in multi-car families, this was only 32.5 percent. A reduction in public transit decreases opportunities for those who do not drive, such as youth, the elderly, or people who cannot afford a car.

Redefining the paradigm

“Living better” through purchasing bigger housing with more lavish amenities thus poses several ethical questions.

In living in the United States, how willing should we be to accept a system in which relatively opulent lifestyles are achievable to the middle class only through low-wage labor by others? And how willing should we be to accept a system in which an increase in amenities purchased by the affluent foreshadows a reduction in those amenities for the financially less endowed?

Ethically, I believe that the American Dream should not be allowed to devolve into a zero-sum game, in which one person’s gain comes at others’ loss. A solution could lie in redefining the ideal of “living better.” Instead of limiting access to space through its privatization, we could think of publicly accessible spaces and amenities as providing new freedoms though opportunities for engaging with people who are different from us and who might thus stretch our thinking about the world.

Redefining the American Dream in this way would open us to new and serendipitous experiences, as we break through the walls that surround us.

Alexandra Staub is an associate professor of architecture with the Rock Ethics Institute at Pennsylvania State University.