Opinion: A CEQA advance environmentalists should explore

By Stuart Leavenworth

For environmentalists in the Golden State, few laws are more sacred than the California Environmental Quality Act. Enacted in 1970, the law gives citizens and interest groups the power to challenge the decisions of local governments and state regulators and block projects they find objectionable.



Used at its best, CEQA has protected poor communities from toxic incinerators and landfills. It has helped conservationists stop big development projects in the wrong places, such as the sensitive Martis Valley near Lake Tahoe.

Yet because of its sweeping nature, CEQA has sometimes been abused in cities, undermining the kind of transit-friendly development that environmentalists say they support.

As the S.F. Streets blog has detailed, litigants using CEQA were able to delay for four years a new bicycle plan for San Francisco, delaying safety improvements that would encourage more cycling. Here in Sacramento, a union attempting to organize health care workers sued to block Sutter Medical Center's expansion, ostensibly for environmental reasons, but most likely as a way to leverage labor concessions. I've heard infill developers say that CEQA can add hundreds of thousands of dollars to an urban project, making it easier to develop out in the hinterlands.

In this legislative session, Gov. Jerry Brown's call for CEQA

reform has generated a predictable smackdown, with business interests on one side and environmental and labor interests on the other. Somewhere in between are infill developers and sustainable cities advocates who recognize CEQA sometimes runs counter to their goals.

The business coalition supports a bill by state Sen. Michael Rubio, D-East Bakersfield, which would create a “standards-based” approach to CEQA. Projects would be exempted from environmental review if they met standards established by other laws.

Critics fear this would lead to a “race to the bottom” on standards, with bad developments getting the green light in areas that had weak zoning and pollution rules. Said Bruce Reznik, executive director of the Planning and Conservation League: “The standards-based approach is either naive or an attempt to cut the public out of the process.”

CEQA defenders might be right that Rubio is overreaching. But their failure to acknowledge the law’s abuses almost assures that a Rubio measure, or something like it, will eventually pass. Ask environmentalists about misuse of the law, and they say such cases are infrequent. Show them a study that concludes that infill projects are challenged more often than “Greenfield” projects, and they wave it off, saying such challenges are rarely successful.

I can understand, to a degree, why environmentalists resist any real compromise. They feel under siege. Globally they (and we) are losing the battle to reduce greenhouse gases. Locally, they face an expansion of oil industry fracking and continued urban sprawl. Many are fed up with the politics of compromise that they feel leads to such defeats.

Yet environmentalists need to ask themselves: Is there a reform to CEQA that might actually advance their goals? Could there be a CEQA exemption that, as California grows, might

reduce greenhouse gases instead of expand them?

There might be. Instead of the standards-based approach – which might allow jurisdictions to more easily approve sprawl-type projects – how about a CEQA exemption that helps us renew and green our cities?

The compromise I suggest would create a CEQA exemption for housing, transit and certain mixed-use projects within cities – and only cities. It would not apply to developments that counties might want in their unincorporated areas.

This exemption would not be a blanket pass. We could still require, for instance, that housing proposed for a "brownfields" site underwent a CEQA review for toxics. But if a project met certain conditions that were not of "state interest," then cities could approve it with no CEQA review.

This compromise would still allow environmentalists to block leapfrog projects that threaten sensitive habitats. Yet by applying strictly to cities, it would give a leg up to projects that reused land and were near transit stations – filling in the empty lots that dot central Sacramento and so many cities.

This proposal would hardly avoid controversy. Counties and land speculators would fight it. Unions would seek to kill it, since it would limit their ability to use this environmental law to extract non-environmental concessions.

CEQA defenders may also claim it is unnecessary. They point to a 2011 law, Senate Bill 226, that allows infill projects to avoid environmental review if their potential impacts were addressed in a prior, program-level analysis done by local jurisdictions. Yet the law is so complicated, and is so dependent on state guidelines and local actions, that it is unclear if SB 226 will deliver real benefits.

Gov. Jerry Brown could be the force to bring this proposed

compromise together, or something like it. The governor believes in “subsidiarity” – shifting responsibility from the state to local officials. CEQA could be modified to give elected city leaders more control. If environmentalists didn’t like those decisions, they could organize and elect new city leaders. That’s the way democracy is supposed to work.

Stuart Leavenworth is editorial page editor of the Sacramento Bee.

Opinion: Winter recreationists must safely play together

By Lisa Herron

The U.S. Forest Service Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit reminds snowmobilers, skiers, and snowshoers to show courtesy when enjoying the outdoors in the winter. Snowmobilers, skiers and snowshoers often share the same areas. The key to sharing them amicably is to be respectful when encountering each other.

The LTBMU permits snowmobiling on many acres of National Forest lands around the Lake Tahoe Basin. Designated wilderness areas are closed to

snowmobiles. Riding there is against federal law and punishable by a fine of $5,000 for an individual, $10,000 for an organization, and/or imprisonment of six months.

In order to ensure safe and enjoyable outings for everyone,

snowmobile operators should reduce speed and lower rpm when in high-use areas or when encountering skiers or snowshoers until they are well beyond those on foot. Slowing down reduces noise and helps skiers and snowshoers maintain a serene experience.

Skiers and snowshoers should consider that snowmobilers may not be able to hear or see them and take appropriate precautions. Make an effort to be visible to the rider and move a safe distance off the trail until the snowmobile passes. When skiers and snowmobilers are

using the same trail, especially in high-use areas, be mindful that extra caution is required: Slow down, look around and respect the environment.

In residential areas, snowmobilers should keep “warm-up” time brief, avoid excessive engine revving, refrain from riding too close to homes, ride during reasonable hours, avoiding early morning and late night rides, and be aware of private land and homeowner boundaries.

California and Nevada now require registration of snowmobiles. In Nevada, as of July 1, 2012, new Over the Snow Vehicles (OSVs) must be registered and by July 1, 2013, all OSVs must be registered.

Snowmobiles can be registered online in California.

The 2012-13 LTBMU Snowmobile Guide is available free to the public. The guide includes a map that shows where snowmobiling is permitted, where you can find groomed trails, and other tips for safe and responsible snowmobiling. Copies are available at North and South Shore Forest Service offices.

Lisa Herron is the public affairs specialist for the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit.

Opinion: Time to create family disaster plan

By Tracy Franklin

As part of the city's initiative to increase communications, we will be offering a 12-part monthly series during 2013 highlighting emergency preparedness. Use these tools to prepare yourself for an emergency. More information is available in the city's website.

Create a Family Disaster Plan

Your family needs a plan that tells everyone where to meet if you have to evacuate; who you've identified as an out-of-state family contact; how to get emergency information in your community; and how to take care of your family pets.

When preparing for an emergency, plan on having enough supplies to get you and your family through at least the first 72 hours. After a major emergency, there's a good chance that traditional emergency response teams will be too busy to take care of you and your family. You need to prepare your home and neighborhood.

• Stock up on at least a three-day supply of food, water, clothes, medical supplies and other necessary equipment for everyone in your family.

• Make sure everyone knows where to find them.

• Decide where and when to reunite your family should you are apart when a disaster strikes.

• Choose a person outside the immediate area to contact if family members are separated. Long distance phone service will probably be restored sooner than local service. Do not use the phone immediately after a major emergency.

• Know the policies of the school or daycare center your children attend. Make plans to have someone pick them up if you are unable to get to them.

• If you have a family member who does not speak English, prepare an emergency card written in English indicating that person’s identification, address and any special needs such as medication or allergies. Tell that person to keep the card with him/her at all times.

• Conduct Earthquake: Duck, Cover and Hold drills every six months with your family.

• Practice Stop, Drop and Roll drills for fire, as well as emergency exit drills in the house regularly.

• Know the safest place in each room because it will be difficult to move from one room to another during an earthquake or explosion.

• Locate the shutoff valves for water, gas and electricity. Learn how to shut off the valves before an emergency. If you have any questions, call your utility company. Remember not to shut off utility valves unless directed to do so by your utility company.

• Make copies of vital records and keep them in a safe deposit box in another city or state. Make sure your originals are stored safely.

• Before a major emergency occurs, call your local Red Cross chapter and Office of Emergency Services to find out about their plans for emergency shelters and temporary medical centers in case of a disaster.

• Establish all the possible ways to exit your house. Keep those areas clear.

• Know the locations of the nearest fire and police stations.

• Take photos and/or videos of your valuables. Make copies and keep them with a friend or relative in another city or state.

• Include your babysitter and other household help in your plans.

• Keep an extra pair of eyeglasses and house and car keys on hand.

• Keep extra cash and change. If electricity is out, you will not be able to use an ATM.

Important numbers

American Red Cross (South Lake Tahoe) (916) 933.7070

El Dorado County Sherriff’s Department (530) 573.3000

Barton Memorial Hospital (530) 541.3420

El Dorado County Snow Removal (530) 573.3180

California Department of Insurance 800.927.HELP

Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care (530) 577.2273

California Highway Patrol (530) 577.1001

Lake Valley Fire Department (530) 577.3737

South Lake Tahoe Snow Removal (530) 542.6030

Road Conditions California 800.427.ROAD

Douglas County Sherriff’s Department (775) 782.9900

Road Conditions Nevada 877.687.6237

El Dorado County Animal Control (530) 577.1766

Social Security Office (Placerville) (530) 626.8421

El Dorado County Health Department (530) 573.3155

South Lake Tahoe Fire Department (530) 542.6160

El Dorado County Jail (530) 573.3031

South Lake Tahoe Police Department (530) 542.6100.

Tracy Franklin is the public information officer for South Lake Tahoe.

Opinion: Obama unraveling Reagan coalition

By Robert Reich

Soon after President Obama’s second inaugural address, John Boehner said the White House would try “to annihilate the Republican Party” and “shove us into the dustbin of history.”

Actually, the GOP is doing a pretty good job annihilating itself. As Louisiana Governor Bobby Jindal put it, Republicans need to “stop being the stupid party.”

The GOP crackup was probably inevitable. Inconsistencies and tensions within the GOP have been growing for years – ever since Ronald Reagan put together the coalition that became the modern Republican Party.

All President Obama has done is finally find ways to exploit these inconsistencies.

Republican libertarians have never got along with social conservatives, who want to impose their own morality on everyone else.

Shrink-the-government fanatics in the GOP have never seen eye-to-eye with deficit hawks, who don't mind raising taxes as long as the extra revenues help reduce the size of the deficit.

The GOP's big business and Wall Street wing has never been comfortable with the nativists and racists in the Party who want to exclude immigrants and prevent minorities from getting ahead.

And right-wing populists have never got along with big business and Wall Street, which love government as long as it gives them subsidies, tax benefits, and bailouts.

Ronald Reagan papered over these differences with a happy anti-big-government nationalism. His patriotic imagery inspired the nativists and social conservatives. He gave big business and Wall Street massive military spending. And his anti-government rhetoric delighted the Party's libertarians and right-wing populists.

But Reagan's coalition remained fragile. It depended fundamentally on creating a common enemy: communists and terrorists abroad, liberals and people of color at home.

On the surface Reagan's GOP celebrated Norman Rockwell's traditional, white middle-class, small-town America. Below the

surface it stoked fires of fear and hate of “others” who threatened this idealized portrait.

In his first term Barack Obama seemed the perfect foil: A black man, a big- spending liberal, perhaps (they hissed) not even an American.

Republicans accused him of being insufficiently patriotic. Right-wing TV and radio snarled he secretly wanted to take over America, suspend our rights. Mitch McConnell declared that unseating him was his party’s first priority.

But it didn’t work. The 2012 Republican primaries exposed all the cracks and fissures in the GOP coalition.

The Party offered up a Star Wars barroom of oddball characters, each representing a different faction – Bachmann, Perry, Gingrich, Cain, Santorum. Each rose on the strength of supporters and then promptly fell when the rest of the Party got a good look.

Finally, desperately, the GOP turned to a chameleon – Mitt Romney – who appeared acceptable to every faction because he had no convictions of his own. But Romney couldn’t survive the general election because the public saw him for what he was: synthetic and inauthentic.

The 2012 election exposed something else about the GOP: it’s utter lack of touch with reality, its bizarre incapacity to see and understand what was happening in the country. Think of Karl Rove’s delirium on Fox election night.

All of which has given Obama the perfect opening – perhaps the opening he’d been waiting for all along.

Obama’s focus in his second inaugural – and, by inference, in his second term – on equal opportunity is hardly a radical agenda. But it aggravates all the tensions inside the GOP. And it leaves the GOP without an overriding target to maintain its

fragile coalition.

In hammering home the need for the rich to contribute a fair share in order to ensure equal opportunity, and for anyone in America – be they poor, black, gay, immigrant, women, or average working person – to be able to make the most of themselves, Obama advances the founding ideals of America in such way that the Republican Party is incapable of opposing yet also incapable of uniting behind.

History and demographics are on the side of the Democrats, but history and demography have been on the Democrats' side for decades. What's new is the Republican crackup – opening the way for a new Democratic coalition of socially-liberal young people, women, minorities, middle-class professionals, and what's left of the anti-corporate working class.

If Obama remains as clear and combative as he has been since Election Day, his second term may be noted not only for its accomplishment but also for finally unraveling what Reagan put together. In other words, John Boehner's fear may be well-founded.

Robert B. Reich is chancellor's professor of Public Policy at UC Berkeley and he was secretary of Labor in the Clinton administration.

Editorial: CalFire burns trust with taxpayers

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Feb. 4, 2013, Sacramento Bee.***

A second state department is caught hiding money. Once again, there will be an audit, a legislative hearing and no doubt a "full" investigation.

While full details are emerging, CalFire concealed $3.66 million that should have gone into the general fund.

Its arrogance underscores the larger issue: The money doesn't belong to some bureaucrat with a badge. It belongs to the people.

In a budget that exceeds $130 billion, $3.6 million might be considered dust. Dust or not, the money didn't belong to CalFire bureaucrats – as they knew, according to internal documents. The money should have been deposited in the general fund, for the benefit of the entire state.

Starting in 2005, CalFire collected the $3.6 million in settlements of lawsuits against property owners who had liability from fires, as was first reported by the *Wall Street Journal* and *Los Angeles Times*. Attorneys defending Sierra Pacific Industries discovered the cache of money while fighting a suit in which the state seeks to recover costs of quelling the Moonlight Fire.

Rather than depositing the money into the general fund as required by law, CalFire used it to buy goodies including digital cameras, GPS equipment and metal detectors, and pay, as the *Bee's* Kevin Yamamura reported, $33,000 for a conference at a Pismo Beach resort.

The California District Attorneys Association, which should have known better, agreed in 2005 to manage the money, in exchange for payments which totaled more than $370,000 over the seven-plus years.

CalFire officials knew months and maybe years ago that what they were doing was wrong, as drafts of early audits showed. They passed up several chances to come clean and hand the

money over to the Department of Finance.

Instead, CalFire officials clammed up as Department of Finance auditors scoured departments looking for hidden funds last year, in the wake of revelations that the state Department of Parks and Recreation squirreled away more than $20 million.

CalFire remained mute as the California attorney general investigated, lightly as it happens, the parks department.

Finally, the District Attorneys Association, whose past leaders showed questionable judgment by entering into the agreement with CalFire, severed the arrangement in December after its current leadership learned about it.

CalFire clearly should have come forward at that point.

The California Department of Finance has commenced an audit. Auditing is an essential part of budgeting. But so is trust. The Department of Finance relies on the honesty of the myriad of state departments to provide truthful and complete information. In this instance, CalFire, a department that is responsible for protecting people and property, stumbled badly, and in the process sacrificed trust.

Opinion: More buyers than sellers in Tahoe housing market

By Robert Stiles

The low supply of housing inventory is giving some economists reason to believe we are in for much bigger price gains this year.

As of Jan. 31, there were 111 active single-family homes on the market in South Lake Tahoe. We haven't seen numbers that low since spring 2005. That's less than a three-month supply of housing inventory. This means that buyers are dominating the market, while there are relatively few sellers.

The tightening in supply is not expected to continue, however. I expect to see a rise in the number of willing sellers, which means inventory will hit a bottom soon.

Twenty-eight percent of the single-family homes sold during the last 90 days were bank owned properties or short sales. At the beginning of 2012 distressed sales accounted for more than half of our local sales.

Some economists are saying we have an artificial increase in housing values, but only time will tell if they are right or wrong.

The yearlong decline in the number of distressed sales as well as housing inventory has stabilized our local market values.

As of Jan. 31, the median sales price for a single-family residential home (per the South Tahoe Association of Realtors) had declined 0.4 percent from $250,000 a year ago to our current $249,000. We hit bottom in August 2012 at $234,000.

Statistics for some of our area neighborhoods: Gardner Mountain area has declined 0.2 percent in value from a year ago. Montgomery Estates is down 12.5 percent, while Y area values are up 35.9 percent from a year ago. For those living in Tahoe Keys, market values have increased 6.7 percent.

Robert Stiles is with Tahoe Real Estate Services.

Letter: Thanks from Saint Joseph Community Land Trust

To the community,

Saint Joseph Community Land Trust wants to thank the St. Theresa Catholic Church Knights of Columbus for hosting its 10-year anniversary celebration with a free spaghetti dinner in Grace Hall. The excellent food and ambiance was appreciated by the board of directors and the many community land trust members in attendance.

Thanks also to Interstate Realty Management (IRM) who organized a free raffle for the event. IRM manages sierra Garden Apartments in South Lake Tahoe, one of the properties owned by Saint Joseph. America and Edher Sanchez, managers for Sierra Garden Apartments, obtained raffle prizes from the following local businesses: Starbucks, Key's Cafe, Jalisco Grill, Taqueria Jalisco, 7-Eleven, and Big Daddy's Burger. IRM also donated a free turkey for the event.

Saint Joseph Community Land Trust is a democratically-controlled nonprofit organization founded in 2002 to address affordable housing and life skills training needs for residents in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Lyn Barnett, president Saint Joseph Community Land Trust

Opinion: Make the debate over guns worthy of our son

By Mark Barden and Jackie Barden

Wednesday's Senate Judiciary Committee hearing on gun violence is the latest in a series of events following the Dec. 14 shootings at Sandy Hook Elementary School. Our 7-year-old son, Daniel, 19 of his first-grade classmates and six educators were killed in the tragedy. We believe this hearing is an opportunity to rise above the hard-line rhetoric and intransigence that too often lead to inaction and hopelessness, and we hope that our leaders and our nation will start a new conversation with a chance of achieving real change.

Our Daniel was a constant source of laughter and joy. He was intelligent, articulate, incredibly affectionate, fair, thoughtful toward others and unfailingly polite. Daniel believed in holding doors open for strangers. He talked to the person sitting alone. He loved to help clean up a mess, and he made sure there was enough milk for everyone before adding it to his cereal.

His kindergarten teacher recently wrote to us: "He is the kind of student that should come wrapped in ribbon because he is a gift to his teachers. I can remember leaving notes for our substitute to 'ask Daniel' if she or he needed help with anything."

Motivated by Daniel's empathy and kindness, one of our relatives created a Facebook page, "What Would Daniel Do?," to inspire others to reach out as our youngest son did.

As lawmakers and others discuss what can be done to curb gun violence, we hope Americans will ask, What would Daniel do?

Daniel would listen and be respectful. Our country needs a new dialogue, one that doesn't follow the tired script of political squabbling. Any improvement to our laws, no matter how small or reasonable, should not be decried as the forward wave of an attempt to "ban guns" or "take away rights." Even those of us who have lost the most are suggesting no such thing.

Daniel would be honest. We know that there are no easy answers to these multifaceted issues. Anyone who suggests that a single law would "solve the problem" isn't telling the truth. But neither is anyone who says that changes in our laws can't make a difference.

Daniel wouldn't give up hope. We refuse to accept the status quo. Making our society safer will require sustained, comprehensive action by individuals as well as by communities and government. As parents, there is nothing more important to us than our relationship with our children. Every parent can start right there, in their own home. On a broader level, it is urgent that we address the gaps in our mental health system and examine school security. We must have the same open dialogue about gun responsibility and accountability. The parental desire to love and protect our children is common ground for gun owners and non-gun owners alike.

We have joined with other families, neighbors and friends in making the Sandy Hook Promise (www.sandyhookpromise.org). We hope every member of Congress and Americans nationwide will join us in pledging to honor the lives lost last month by coming together to end these violent tragedies.

Our Daniel wanted to be a fireman like his uncles. He played drums in our family band, and he could run like the wind. Until Dec. 14, Daniel's future was limited only by the size of his dreams.

Our son's future was stolen from him: There will be no

firehouse, no more rock band, no Boston Marathon.

But if our nation uses this moment to make the future brighter for other children, Daniel's life and the lives of his classmates and educators will have meaning for years to come.

Our nation's ability to deal with gun violence is limited only by the civility of our discourse, the scope of our ambitions and — as Daniel would have done — our willingness to come together and take action.

Mark Barden is a musician and Jackie Barden is a teacher. They live in Newtown, Conn. This column first appeared in the Washington Post.

Letter: 'We the people' often goes missing

To the community,

In his inaugural speech, President Obama repeatedly made reference to "we the people" which underlines the fact that the people have a social contract with the government. Thus, everything from funding phony wars to raising taxes is done in the name of the people. The government is our government. But at all levels of government the term social contract has been thrown into the wastebasket. It isn't part of our operating political thought or practice. We the people have become an abstraction.



Bill Crawford

All people are created equal was also emphasized, underlined, by the president in his speech. The idea is as old as the hills. In about 308 BC, Zeno, the stoic taught that each person has a divine spark within their being. Thus, there is a spiritual equality. The stoics believed that slavery was a violation of that spiritual equality. So man is endowed by his creator. That's a powerful idea that breaks the chains of bondage. Let's not put it in history's wastebasket.

Bill Crawford, South Lake Tahoe

Opinion: Doping has more repercussions than we think

By Alexander Nevsky

A spotlight was shone this month on the harmful practice of steroid use during Lance Armstrong's interview with Oprah Winfrey, where he admitted to using performance-enhancing drugs in all seven of his Tour de France victories.

For an adult, the use of steroids is dangerous, but for youth

who are still growing and developing, steroid use can be devastating. In 1993, a top Russian TV Channel shot and aired a documentary, introducing me as natural, drug-free, bodybuilder. Since that initial exposure and publicity, I have used every interview and public appearance to articulate my anti-steroid message and have parlayed it into a 20-year, international anti-steroids campaign.

Article Tab: In this July 24, 2005 file photo, Luke Armstrong, rear right, tries to touch the winner's trophy held by his father, Lance Armstrong, after Armstrong won his seventh straight Tour de France cycling race, in Paris. During the second part Friday, Jan. 18, 2013, of Oprah Winfrey's interview with Armstrong, Armstrong talked about talking with Luke after his son had defended him concerning doping allegations.

It is well-documented, through reputable medical studies, that anabolic steroids can cause many serious health risks, including kidney failure, liver damage and high risk of stroke and heart attack (even in young people). While adults can be expected to be informed about these potential dangers, younger users are unlikely to fully understand, or give credence to, the grave consequences.

With that in mind, I decided to produce a full length documentary film, "Mr. Universe," to promote my international anti-steroid campaign. An ancillary goal of the documentary is to clean up the sport of bodybuilding, which has suffered dramatically from steroid scandals.

The president of the World Fitness Federation/World Bodybuilding Federation, Edmundas Daubaras, is working with international anti-drug organizations to bring doping tests to all bodybuilding contests and competitions. Executive Vice President Robert Madrid is also coordinating the anti-steroid message of the WFF/WBBF in the United States.

I have a strong hope and wish that young athletes today will not repeat the mistakes of Lance Armstrong, and other prominent sports stars, who literally “took the wrong road” and stand to lose one of the most valuable gifts of all: their health.

Alexander Nevsky was crowned Mr. Universe in 2012. This column first appeared in the Orange County Register.