Opinion: Cheaper housing won't fix the crisis

By Jerry Nickelsburg

This time of year, the swallows return to Capistrano, and I return to my birthplace, San Francisco, for the city's annual pre-budget finance conference. For the last few years I have kicked things off with an economic outlook for the coming year, replete with a discussion of risks. This being San Francisco, naturally, I had to talk about the high costs of housing as one of the risks to continued economic growth.

On my way home, I thought of an SAT-exam like question. One of these things is not like the others: San Francisco, Cleveland, Hong Kong, Sydney, and Vancouver. I am going to take a wild guess and say that you, the reader, have chosen Cleveland.

You are right. But why? After all, Cleveland rocks, but just not in the same way as the other cities. One of the many ways it is different is in the cost of living. Demographia's just-released 2017 affordability study has Cleveland as one of the most affordable cities for housing, and each of the other cities in my SAT question as among the least affordable.

This suggests something important about the affordability crisis that has not, but really should, enter the discussion of housing affordability: the cities that we find most attractive are cities where housing is "unaffordable." In other words, the affordable housing crisis is not just about a lack of housing supply.

In my current city, Los Angeles, one hears over and over again that everyone is leaving because no one can afford to live here. This talk reminds me of the Yogi Berra homily, "Nobody goes there anymore. It's too crowded." Of course, exactly the opposite is true, and that truth is what should guide us in our housing policy.

The oft-made mistake is to suggest that housing is expensive because, as Demographia incorrectly puts it in its report, “Studies do not leave the slightest doubt that unaffordable housing is almost everywhere and every time caused by the same factor: housing supply restrictions.” Well, these “studies,” some of which are by very thoughtful people, leave plenty of doubt, and some of their authors ought to go back to Econ 101. Prices are not just a supply phenomenon but are rather an interaction between supply, what is available for sale, and demand, what people want to buy.

Clearly the people who live in San Francisco, Los Angeles and other cities on Demographia’s list of cities with an affordability crisis could afford to live there. They just paid a larger portion of their income to do so. They could have moved to a more affordable place to live—Cleveland, for example. So those who say that housing prices are unaffordable are saying that, at lower prices, there would be more demand than supply. Let’s explore the implications of this.

Cleveland is so affordable because many people find it less desirable (think “lake effect” blizzards). Indeed, half the population of Cleveland left over the past 50 years. The housing stock is more than ample for the people who want to live there. Which reminds me of the time I interviewed for a job in Buffalo, N.Y., right after graduation. Part of the pitch was, “Buffalo is a great place. It is so depressed that you can afford a really good house.” Somehow this did not seem like an endorsement of a community I wanted to move to.

The reason San Francisco is different is that it is a wonderful place to live. The scenery is spectacular, the climate mild, cultural amenities are abundant and in a very short time one can be in the Sierra for some incredible winter sports or at Mavericks for world-class surfing.

Edward Glaeser, in his towering work on urban economies, "The Triumph of the City," said "vitality makes people willing to pay for space." Glaeser, like many other urban economists, argues for more building, but the point repeatedly made by those who study urban migration is that exciting innovation (documented by UC Berkeley economist Enrico Moretti), natural amenities such as beaches, mountains and lakes (documented in the "superstar cities" study of Goyurko, Sinai, Mayer) and cultural amenities (as oft described by economist Richard Florida) attract people from declining to successful cities.

To be sure, San Francisco is not to everyone's taste; some prefer the charm of a Louisiana bayou, and others the silence of a Minnesota winter. But given the housing stock, many more people want to live in San Francisco than can. An estimate in a 2015 paper by Moretti and the University of Chicago's Chang-Tai Hsieh found that more affordable housing could increase San Francisco's population by 100 percent or more. So there exists significant demand for San Francisco housing that a moderate change in zoning and building standards will not correct.

The population growth Hsieh and Moretti found means that today's locals in places where people want to live are going to have to write a check for the infrastructure to support them. This is an old story in a place like California. In 1967, one of Ronald Reagan's first acts as governor was to increase taxes dramatically, giving us Californians the highly progressive income tax system we enjoy today, and that Republicans everywhere rail against. The reason? Large-scale migration to the state had caused his predecessor, Pat Brown, to build infrastructure to support a burgeoning population, and as a result the state was running a structural deficit.

So what's happening in San Francisco—or Seattle or Austin, or any number of popular places where the cost of living is rising—is the market system doing its thing. The market increases prices to ration the available land through the cost of housing. And people economize on their consumption of housing by living in smaller quarters, sharing with roommates, or stacking up generations. And for some, the price is not worth the value they would receive, and they leave. That is how any market rationalizes differences between supply and demand.

What about those who are squeezed out of California (such as my kids, who moved to Colorado)? The dad in me says, “That’s horrible, I want them down the block from me.” But the economist in me says, “They do not value what Los Angeles has, relative to their life in a small town in Colorado, enough to sacrifice other things for it.” Resources, when scarce, are appropriately allocated according to their value to those consuming them.

And what about our schoolteachers, firemen, police and city officials who struggle to live in the high-priced cities where they work? Here is the rub. When a place is really attractive and therefore really expensive—take Santa Barbara—many who perform valuable services live elsewhere, like in Ventura, 90 minutes away during rush hour.

Instead of wringing our hands about affordability in high-demand places, and trying to build enough to meet a worldwide demand that is difficult to satiate, we should be saying, “Great, we have a really successful city, but we also want to have a city with certain professional, service, and demographic characteristics,” and design housing policy targeted to that. For example, Santa Clara County built high-quality affordable housing that it rents to schoolteachers. It is a small program, but it is a good start. What doesn’t work are overly broad measures, such as directing developers to make 20 percent of their units affordable in exchange for building permits. Such policies generate homes for only a very few San Franciscans (while attracting ever-more newcomers who want to live there).

That is not to say we should ignore affordability. We definitely must pay attention to affordability, as we plan the cities we want to live in. But in doing so, we must pay attention not only to whether we have enough housing supply but also to the nature of the demand in places where people want to live. If we ignore demand, we risk creating urban nightmares—of crowding, traffic, long commutes and ill health—in pursuit of a successful and affordable city.

Jerry Nickelsburg, an economist at UCLA Anderson School of Management, writes the Pacific Economist column.

Opinion: Gambling finally non-issue for NFL owners

By Ed Graney, Las Vegas Review-Journal

For decades, the folks who owned NFL teams hardly portrayed themselves as bastions of progressive thought. There weren't many John Deweys running around the fraternity house of billionaires.

Perhaps more amazing than owners voting 31-1 on Monday in favor of allowing relocation for Davis and his Raiders from Oakland to Las Vegas were topics of discussion that arose before the official announcement.

Or, more important, didn't.

Several sources confirmed that gambling was barely mentioned — a few said not at all — and that the one thorn in the side of owners thought too big for Las Vegas to land a franchise was no longer visible.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Calif. needs to stop abusing taxpayers

By Ted Gaines

From the same governor who brought you the illegal fire tax now comes a plan to blow the top off California's spending cap and leave taxpayers on the hook for tens of billions in extra taxes. It's a bad idea that fractures the faith between citizens and government and spells trouble for California's fiscal future.

Ted Gaines

With California's runaway spending, it's hard to believe the state even has an expenditure limit. But in 1979, a year after signing off on the revolutionary Proposition 13, voters passed Proposition 4, implementing the "Gann Limit," which would peg California's state spending to the 1978-79 level and only let it grow adjusted for inflation and population. State revenues above the voter-approved limit actually had to be refunded to taxpayers, an event that would cause panic attacks in today's money-hungry Capitol.

In 1986-87, a boon year for tax revenues, the state issued more than $1 billion in rebates to relieved taxpayers who finally had some protection from an insatiable Sacramento.

Alas, it was too good to go on forever. Proposition 111 in 1990 defanged the Gann Limit, weakening its terms, and it now rarely factors into budgeting decisions.

But, weak as it is, it’s still on the books, and there is no ceiling too high for the Democrats when it comes to government spending. Gov. Jerry Brown’s new budget proposal is straining against even the wilted Gann Limit, and he’s going to do something about it.

Is he going to cut spending? Is he going to refund taxpayers? Or is he going to manipulate the budget to carve out more room to spend?

If you went with manipulate, I’ve got a job in the California Department of Finance for you.

Brown proposes taking $22 billion off the Gann Limit books this year. The money would not be accounted for as state spending or as local spending, as required in the original proposition. For Gann Limit purposes it would just disappear, like the hopes of fiscal conservatives all around the state, if his scheme is successful.

In essence, he would open up an avenue for another $22 billion in spending by reclassifying the current $22 billion. He would not spend less, he would not adhere to the even the watered-down mandates of the 1979 Gann Limit reform, he would just trick his way around the spending cap.

Try this sort of deception on your tax return to see how the state normally views creative exemptions of the sort they are practicing now.

Spending is taxes. The two can’t be separated, and Gov.

Brown’s bad-faith end-run around the Gann Limit guarantees a heavier load for California taxpayers and a California perpetually stretched to its fiscal limit.

I have a novel idea: Live up to the law. If taxpayers deserve rebates, give them rebates. Don’t twist and distort or outright ignore the law just because it lets taxpayers keep more of their money. They earned it in the first place; it’s not a gift that a benevolent government doles out.

If the state is bringing in too much money and spending too much, get rid of the illegal fire tax or cut the Vehicle License Fee. Cut tax rates. That would put more money back in people’s pockets without putting the government in the way as a rebate middleman.

The Gann Limit has been little more than a rumor for decades, but it is a rule passed by the people to protect them from just the kind of spending excess proposed by Gov. Brown. It’s a sad commentary on our state, but when it comes to raising your taxes, rules seem made to be broken.

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: Douglas surplus should go to water systems

To the community,

It is good news, indeed, to hear that Douglas County has a $2 million so-called surplus and now needs only to figure out how best to spend it. Shall we hire more staff? Give everyone a raise? Or fix the museum roof?

The idea of a so-called budget surplus that can be spent on new entitlements for the county is a complete non sequitur. Not only is this short sighted and illogical, but it defies pressing fiduciary obligations of our Board of Commissioners.

Given the vast overhaul proposed by the county's newly released preliminary engineering report on county-owned water utilities, can there be any real question about how to allocate this so-called surplus? What thought has been given to prioritizing the county's obligation to bring its own substandard water infrastructure up to par?

After 27 years of running our water system at the lake, we now face a staggering price tag, fast approaching $50 million, to fix our rundown infrastructure. Our fragile and porous system is a byproduct of years of patch and fix mentality that endangers whole communities, leaving us vulnerable to complete system collapse, fire hazard, and prohibitive rate increases for the foreseeable future. And the county wants to launch a new storm water program?

The county needs to get serious about its real unmet obligations and liabilities. Some of its spending suggestions will add millions in future county budget expenditures, far beyond the present so-called surplus.

Consider this. If the Board of Commissioners chooses to squander its $2 million so-called surplus on new obligations and fails to address the real water crisis they own at the lake, future property tax income will decline precipitously, and the county's next conversation will be how to handle the resulting budge deficit.

Dana Tibbitts, Cave Rock

Letter: Moose Lodge assists with weekly meal

To the community,

“On behalf of the SLT Moose Lodge No. 1632 and Women of the Moose, Chapter 408, we would like to take this opportunity to thank the volunteers who coordinate the Bread & Broth dinners,” wrote Women of the Moose member Angie Keil. “It is a pleasure to have been a part of these efforts in helping our brothers and sister in the community.”

Keil and fellow Moose members Kim Blanck, Scott Blumenthal (SLT Moose Lodge governor), Christi Olmstead and Dana Tucker donated three hours of their time to represent their Moose Lodge members at the organization’s March 20 Adopt A Day of Nourishment sponsorship. B&B volunteers welcomed the incredible service that the Moose Lodge members provided with the dinner’s setup, serving and cleanup.

But service is nothing new to Moose Lodge members who regularly commit to helping others in the community. This nonprofit, fraternal organization enjoys bringing members together at their local lodge headquarters for social gatherings and sharing their commitment to helping their community. Thank you to the SLT Moose Lodge and Women of the Moose for being a wonderful example helping others.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth

Opinion: Conspiracy theorists create distrust

By Jennifer Mercieca

“Nothing is more surprising,” wrote David Hume in his 1758 “First Principles of Government,” than “the easiness with which the many are governed by the few.”

What explains this surprising easiness? Trust is at the heart of the answer. Hume believed that since the people always outnumber their leaders (and thus retain the power of “force”), the legitimacy of all government rests merely “on opinion.” Governments exist solely because “the many” trust the government to serve their needs. Once government loses the trust of “the many,” then they will refuse to be governed by the few.

From my perspective as an American scholar of communication and rhetoric, Hume frames many questions, including: What tools of rhetoric and communication inspire the trust needed to support legitimate governments? And, in eras such as ours when trust in government declines, what rhetorical appeals must government leaders make to keep power? And conversely, as trust in government declines in the U.S., what role does rhetoric play in diminishing that trust?

Americans today still trust the government to do a lot of things—even if we don’t always value and recognize its role in our lives. According to a 2015 Pew Research Center survey, 94 percent of Americans think it’s the government’s job to keep “the country safe from terror”; 88 percent think it’s the government’s job to respond “to natural disasters”; 87 percent think it’s the government’s job to ensure “safe food and medicine”; 76 percent think it’s the government’s job to maintain “infrastructure”; and 70 percent think it’s the government’s job to ensure “access to high quality education.”

We trust, when we buy food or drinks from a grocery store or a restaurant, that the government has checked to make sure we won’t be poisoned. We trust that the government has made sure that the water we drink and the air we breathe won’t give us diseases. We trust that if we get sick, the government has credible research about how to cure us and has credentialed enough people as doctors and nurses to treat us. We trust that the government-provided roads we drive on won’t destroy our cars and will take us in the direction that we want to go. We trust that the government-printed money we earn will be deposited into government-guaranteed checking accounts and available for us when we want to buy things. We trust that the government will make sure that the lights, heat, and water will go on, and if there is a natural disaster that all of these services will be restored as quickly as possible.

But such trust and legitimacy, as Jürgen Habermas reminds us, is fragile. And so political communities can be destroyed when the “system does not succeed in maintaining the requisite level of mass loyalty.” What is the requisite level of “mass loyalty” and have we crossed over into a dangerous decay in trust in our government?

According to a 2015 Pew Research Poll, “Only 19 percent of Americans today say they can trust the government in Washington to do what is right,” which is consistent with trends since 2007. Pew reports that this widespread distrust represents “the longest period of low trust in government in more than 50 years.” A 2016 Gallup poll found that we also have historically low trust for all sorts of authority figures, including clergy (44 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion, down from well above 60 percent in the 1970s and 1980s), journalists (23 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion), lawyers (18 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion), and labor union leaders (18 percent of Americans have a very high or high opinion).

What explains our distrust in our government and our leaders? According to Harvard political scientist Robert Putnam, Americans have grown more distrustful of one another and our government because we have less “bridging social capital” and more “bonding social capital” than previous generations of Americans. That is, we spend more time with people like us and we spend less time interacting with others, including government organizations and schools—we are failing to join the PTA or the bowling league and instead are cocooned in our media bubbles. Our lack of participation negatively influences our trust in one another and in the decisions made by the government because, in this case, unfamiliarity breeds contempt.

Today, not only is our trust in government and established leadership waning, but lately it is under attack by a surprising figure: the president of the United States.

Donald Trump became a political aspirant on the strength of a conspiracy theory—the “birther” argument over President Barack Obama’s birth certificate. According to one count he subsequently advanced more than 50 conspiracies during his presidential campaign. Now, as president, Trump foments distrust by proclaiming corruption and conspiracy in many aspects of American life.

Trump has sought to undermine the trust that we have for judges by referring to them as “so-called” and implying that they are part of a plot against American safety. He has sought to undermine the trust that we have for the media, polls, and facts by claiming that journalists are an “opposition party” and by pre-emptively claiming that any negative polls are “fake news.” He has appointed cabinet members who actively purport to distrust established science such as inoculations and climate change.

What makes such conspiracy theories appealing—and what are the consequences of such appeals for government legitimacy? As

Richard Hofstadter famously noted, conspiracy rhetoric is premised on the “paranoid style.” Conspiracy argument, he observed, is rife with “heated exaggeration, suspiciousness, and conspiratorial fantasy” that creates a coherent narrative of a dangerous plot. Conspiracy theories in American history often have been premised on the blurring of difference between appearance and reality: what is apparent is false and hides the actual plotting that is determined to and capable of destroying America.

Conspiracy rhetoric is also premised on a self-confirming or circular reasoning (Latin: *circulus in probando* or “circle in proving”). Once the narrative of conspiracy and corruption takes hold within a political community it is difficult to dispel because conspirators cannot be trusted to tell the truth about their plot. Conspiracy argument is “self-sealing” in that any holes in the story are quickly covered up by the logic of the conspiracy. For example: why didn’t media reports show that there is a massive increase in crime, as Trump claimed? Not because crime didn’t increase, but because the media are part of the plot to deny that crime has increased.

In this way, conspiracy rhetoric creates a perverse sort of legitimacy for the leader who uses it. And conditions are ripe for conspiracy rhetoric.

Communication scholar Jack Bratich explains via Michel Foucault, that conspiracy theories participate in any society’s “regime of truth,” or the politics surrounding the techniques and standards that a society uses to determine “true” from “false.” Obviously, there is much power at stake in labeling one version of “truth” a “conspiracy” and another “fact.”

It’s easier for society to control what counts as “true” when there is a unified “truth” presented to the public via mass media. But the fracturing of media and the dominance of polarized news have created concurrent truth realities that enable conspiracy theories to flourish.

Trump's conspiracy arguments have exploited pre-existing distrust, frustration, and polarized versions of "truth." What are the potential consequences? Conspiracy rhetoric is dangerous because it creates a cohesive reality for those who adhere to its narrative, and naturally lends itself to violence.

The Civil War, for example, can be seen as the culmination of two opposing conspiracy arguments. Abolitionists believed that there was a "slave power" conspiracy determined to deprive the North of political power. Slaveholders believed that Abraham Lincoln was part of a plot to abolish slavery, deprive them of their justly owned property, and destroy the South. Despite Lincoln's assurances in his First Inaugural Address, Southerners had been convinced of the conspiracy of "miserable fanatics" against their rights and believed themselves justified in seceding from the Union.

Like the polarizing rhetoric leading up to the Civil War, Trump's distrustful conspiracy rhetoric could potentially make the nation even more distrustful of the government and established leaders. In this way, Trump is at war with his government and himself. The conspiracy rhetoric he uses to legitimize himself as president threatens the fragile trust that legitimizes his government.

Jennifer Mercieca is an associate professor in the Department of Communication at Texas A&M University in College Station and is working on a book on the 2016 presidential election.

Opinion: Cost of living, availability of jobs tough on families

By Joe Mathews

Californians used to envy residents of our beautiful, wine-and-wealth-drenched Central Coast. Now we have reason to pity them.

And not just because Nicole Kidman is producing a TV series about women murderers in Monterey.

The past year has brought calamity. Last summer's Soberanes Fire burned a vast swath around Big Sur for 83 days, fouling the region's air and becoming the most expensive wildfire to suppress in U.S. history. Central Coast communities suffered some of the most severe water shortages in the state during the drought. And when this winter's rains came, the Central Coast was hit with landslides, and the failure of a vital bridge.

Joe Mathews

Then there's this: a new report from the Public Policy Institute of California (PPIC) shows the Central Coast is California's capital of child poverty.

Santa Barbara County, of all places, had the highest poverty rate for young children (30.8 percent) in California from

2012-14, the years for which the most recent data was available. Other Central Coast counties—Monterey and San Benito—had the second-highest child poverty rate.

Such statistics run counter to the usual narratives of California poverty, which involve the Central Valley, Inland Empire, or the North State. But don’t be shocked. The geography of California poverty has been flipped by coastal prosperity itself.

More advanced methods of measuring poverty—by accounting for differences in the cost of living and the use of safety-net benefits across regions—have captured regional shifts in poverty. In the process, they have revealed greater poverty on the Central Coast.

The region’s very high cost of living leaves even people who earn well above the traditional poverty line quite poor. Consider, for example, the poorer person living in Santa Barbara who considers moving to the poor San Joaquin Valley community of Tulare.

In Tulare, the cost of living would be lower. But you’d be less likely to be working, and you’d be making relatively less when you work, which would leave you relying more on social services to support your family.

In Santa Barbara, you’d more likely to get a job that pays more than you’d make in the valley. But you’ll still be well short of what you need to cover housing, medical bills and the overall higher cost of living. And your higher income might make you ineligible for safety net programs that would help.

“In the Central Coast counties, cost of living is higher and social safety net receipt is lower,” says PPIC research fellow and labor economist Sarah Bohn. “So both factors are driving up poverty rates there, relatively speaking.”

The Central Coast’s predicament contributes to an updated picture of the stresses of a state in which poverty and wealth are neighbors. Most poor children in California live in families with at least one working adult. And, even in an era when California's job growth leads the nation, working people are struggling to keep up with the rising cost of living. Child poverty rates in the state are still substantially higher than before the Great Recession.

And such families don't have enough help. Eligibility for social programs is still tied to a federal poverty line—$11,770 for a single person, $20,090 for a family of three—that lags reality in California's regions. The California Poverty Threshold—which varies for regional costs—is $14,787 for a single adult and $26,492 for a family of three in Santa Barbara County. The Self-Sufficiency Standard—covering basic needs—is $27,000 in Santa Barbara County, and $59,000 a year for a single parent with two children.

As a result, poverty programs don't have all that much impact in places where it's expensive to live. This should trigger two responses. First, California's wealthier jurisdictions must get better at reaching those eligible for programs. Second, more programs should be adjusted to make eligibility easier—and benefits more generous—in costlier regions.

The Central Coast's child poverty also speaks to the scandalously minimalist response by governments to California's housing shortage. The huge run-up in housing prices here—the median home price in California is two-and-a-half times the national average—is not merely a financial headache for the ambitious. It's a poverty issue. And you can see it in the excessive overcrowding in high-poverty neighborhoods from Santa Maria to Salinas.

It's a cruel irony that many of the coastal California cities and counties that have imposed tight restrictions on new housing and development also are home to levels of poverty that don’t get enough attention. Such communities should be aggressively challenged. Their NIMBYism, rationalized as “preserving community character,” is actually making people poorer.

None of these changes will come easily or quickly. In the meantime, say a prayer for the kids of the Central Coast.

Joe Mathews is California and innovation editor of Zócalo Public Square.

Opinion: Bay Area’s fast train to Wasco

By Joe Mathews

Dear Bay Area,

Welcome to Wasco.


Joe Mathews

You may never have heard of this city of 25,000 in the San Joaquin Valley. You probably can’t pronounce it (it’s WAW-skoh).

But you and Wasco share a future.

You could be connected—at least temporarily—by the most expensive infrastructure project in state history.

Your Wasco connection is a byproduct of problems with high-speed rail’s first phase from San Francisco to Los Angeles. The financial and engineering challenges of tunneling the Tehachapi Mountains have delayed construction to L.A. And the project is short by $2 billion to build it to Bakersfield, the hometown of U.S. House Majority Leader Kevin McCarthy, a fierce opponent of funding high-speed rail.

Unless the money materializes, high-speed rail will start by connecting the Silicon Valley to the Central Valley—from San Jose to a temporary station in Wasco, a little northwest of Bakersfield.

Wasco might seem too small to play such a big transportation role. But when you visit, I hope you’ll agree with me that a fast train from America’s wealthiest metropolitan area to the best darn town in northern Kern County is kismet.

Wasco will be ready for Bay Area arrivals. The town is expert at processing heavy volumes of visitors; the Wasco State Prison, which accounts for about 5,000 of the town’s population, is a “reception center” for people entering the state prison system. You can start preparing for your visit by listening to country songs, from Merle Haggard’s “Radiator Man from Wasco” to Jaime Wyatt’s “Wasco,” about picking up her boyfriend from prison.

This time of year, you’ll be greeted in Wasco by spectacular views of coastal mountains to the west, Sierra to the east, and blossoming almond trees. If you arrive hungry, you’ll find stick-to-your-ribs options you might not see in San Francisco. Head first to Hoyett’s Sandwich Shop, a centerpiece of Wasco life since 1948, with terrific char burgers and chili. If Hoyett’s is closed, it’s a short stroll to Teresa’s for chile verde or to La Canasta for shrimp cocktail.

Bring your bike, Bay Area types: the city is adding lanes. Or walk: Wasco's new meandering sidewalks make the city more pedestrian-friendly. While Uber and Lyft won't work here, the city's Dial-A-Ride service will take you anywhere within Wasco's 9.4-square-mile city limits for $1.75, and outside town—paved roads only, please—for $2.

No stop in Wasco is complete without a visit to the Wasco Union High School auditorium. No joke. The 1928 Renaissance Revival auditorium, one of California's most beautiful buildings, is on the National Register of Historic Places. And Wasco is great at putting on special events, like the spectacular Festival of Roses in September. But for Bay Area types, the best thing about Wasco may be the slower pace. The local parks are large and leafy. During hot valley summers, you can pay $1 and swim all day in the public pool. And you can take your pets to Wasco without worry. The local vet is trusted by animal owners all over the southern San Joaquin Valley.

If you need a hotel, the best bet is the new Best Western on Highway 46. Or maybe you could rent a place from well-to-do locals who spend weekends in cabins in the Greenhorn Mountains.

If you decide to settle in, for just $189,000, you can buy a terrific four-bedroom, two-bath home with a two-car garage and, according to the listing, a driveway large enough for an RV.

Wasco's central location also makes it a great starting point for trips around the region. In the Wasco vicinity, you can watch drag strip racing in Famoso, raft the Kern River, or rent a houseboat on Lake Success. You can even hire a limo to take you to Paso Robles wine country.

Wasco has a very different economy from San Francisco's, but you'll see lots of solar panels and a start-up, Sweetwater

Technology Resources, that develops ways to clean water from the oil industry. And if you’re one of those stalwarts of Bay Area politics, drop by the Wasco City Hall, where the City Council boasts a higher percentage of ethnic minorities than the San Francisco Board of Supervisors.

At the council, you’ll discover one irony about the potential Bay-to-Wasco connection: The city officially opposes high-speed rail because of concerns that businesses in its path, like the almond processor SunnyGem, will be forced to relocate.

But perhaps things will work out, and you Bay Area folks will soon be dancing at Mr. and Mrs. Nightclub. When you step outside for some air, you’ll see how the lights on Wasco’s beautiful water tower change color with the seasons. The tower bears the city logo, featuring a rose and Wasco’s welcoming motto, one big enough for all California:

“Grow With Us.”

All aboard,

Joe Mathews

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.

Opinion: L.A. is too good to host the Olympics

By Joe Mathews

Los Angeles should drop its bid for the 2024 Olympics—before it gets chosen.

Paris is the heavy favorite to be awarded the 2024 games during a vote coming up in September. But the contest has changed, with all other contenders for 2024 having dropped out (Budapest bailed last month), leaving L.A. as the only challenger. And when you look at the L.A. and Paris plans, L.A. has the stronger bid; it’s far more likely to produce exciting games while avoiding the organizational problems and cost overruns of previous Olympics.

Joe Mathews

What’s most promising about L.A.’s bid is also what makes it perilous. L.A. is bidding not merely to hold the Olympics, but to transform them. Specifically, L.A. pledges “to create a new Games for a new era.”

There’s much transforming to be done. The Olympics over the last generation has become more associated with corruption than sport: doping, vote-buying by bid cities, displacement of poor people by Olympic construction, propagandistic use of the games by human rights violators from Russia to China, and overspending that leaves Olympic cities with debt and dead infrastructure.

All of which begs these questions: How can we be sure that Olympic corruption won’t sully our reputation? And, if L.A. succeeds in hosting a “clean” Olympics, what’s to prevent the Olympics’ wheeler-dealers from exploiting a triumph here to take advantage of other cities for future Games?

Such questions may sound peculiar, but California has a peculiar relationship with the Olympics. While the rest of the world has soured on the corrupt Olympic movement, we remain an island of Olympic love. One L.A. survey showed 88 percent support for the Games.

California’s Olympics love is rooted in nostalgia for the famously well-run and profitable 1984 Games, when L.A. embraced a vision of itself as an international city. But the Games we’re bidding for now are not those Olympics. Today’s Games are bloated, with too many sports and expenses.

They also come with more baggage. The most recent Summer Olympics, held in Brazil last summer at twice the anticipated cost, were a disaster for that developing country, contributing to economic and political turmoil, and leaving behind useless infrastructure. The budget for the 2020 Games in Tokyo is now projected at four times the original estimate. The 2014 Winter Games in Sochi, Russia, were beset by state-sponsored doping and massive construction corruption. The 2008 Games in Beijing provided a pretext for China’s rulers to crack down on dissent and demolish important neighborhoods

These recent games centered on the “Development Model” of Olympics—using the bid to transform cities by building. L.A.’s bid is a welcome departure; it relies on existing facilities for nearly everything, containing the projected budget at $5.3 billion. (Sochi spent a reported $50 billion).

There’s a strong case that the Olympics serves L.A.’s self-interest. California’s economy depends so heavily on international trade and tourism that an Olympics could advertise our global connections and openness, particularly as much of America turns isolationist. Plus, a 2024 Games would allow L.A. to show off civic improvements, including its expanding transit system.

And the Olympics would be fortunate to have us host. No city in the world is better suited to the games, from our good weather to our expertise in handling mega-events. “Make Los Angeles the permanent host of the Summer Olympics,” the sports economist Andrew Zimbalist advised last year.

Some news reports have suggested that President Trump and his bans on travel and refugees and immigrants could hurt L.A.’s chances of winning. But the French have their own anti-immigrant racist populist—the leading presidential contender Marine Le Pen—to defend.

No, the real question about L.A.’s bid is whether we’re too good for the Olympics. Our association is likely to sully us, and require moral compromises. The *New York Times* reported recently that the U.S. Olympic Committee was soft-pedaling its response to the Russia doping scandal because of fears that a hard U.S. line could hurt L.A.’s Olympic bid.

If L.A.’s bid wins, our Games could become an Olympic version of the “The Bridge on the River Kwai,” a 1957 film classic about Allied prisoners of war who dutifully build a railroad bridge that serves the interests of their Japanese captors. In the same way, an Olympic movement, restored by Los Angeles’ dutiful work, would be newly free to go back into the world and grant the Games to repressive regimes and developing countries that can’t really afford it. Do we really want to make that possible?

Nope. It’s not California’s job to save the Olympics. L.A. should preserve its Olympic ideals by dropping its bid and, yes, handing the 2024 Games to the French*. C’est la vie.* But we’ll always have 1984.

Joe Mathews writes the Connecting California column for Zócalo Public Square.

Letter: Kirkwood helps at Bread & Broth

To the community,

Hosting their bi-monthly Bread & Broth Adopt A Day of Nourishment, Kirkwood Mountain Resort sent a great crew from their mountain operations team to help B&B volunteers at the Monday meal on March 13.

The Kirkwood team led by Tom Fortune included Kelly Keith, Reid and Mattie Devine, and Mike Niccoli and his daughter, Iris. Thanks to Vail EpicPromise grant funding, Kirkwood hosts six Adopt A Days a year providing nutritious and filling meals to many hungry members of our community.

B&B provides two meals every week. Second Serving on Fridays at the LT Community Presbyterian Church which serves soup and a simple entrée and a full course dinner at B&B's Monday Meal held at St. Theresa Church Grace Hall. The Monday meals are funded by the Adopt A Day program which requires a $250 donation and encourages the AAD sponsor to send a crew of up to five folks to help the B&B volunteers and gain an insight to the service to the community that their sponsorship provides.

After spending her time packing food giveaway bags and serving 96 meals, first time Kirkwood volunteer Mattie Devine shared her thoughts on her time volunteering at a B&B dinner. "As a member of the community, serving at the B&B dinner was not only humbling, but a great learning experience. Bread & Broth, and the great people who volunteer and work here, are more important than ever with such a long and tough winter her in Tahoe."

B&B would like acknowledge that our “work” of helping feed the needy is made possible by the generosity of both time and funds provided by Kirkwood and their compassionate team members.

To partner with B&B as a donor or sponsor, contact me at 530.542.2876 or carolsgerard@aol.com.

Carol Gerard, Bread & Broth