

Opinion: Sharing services makes sense in era of deficits

By Paul Saffo

Small-town living has long been part of the American dream, but amid California's fiscal crisis, it is becoming a nightmare. Cities like Vallejo have declared bankruptcy as municipal deficits deepen. Others, like Maywood in Southern California, have fired their city employees and outsourced everything from police and fire protection to pothole filling.

Cities all over the state are contemplating similar measures, but the Bay Area is particularly at risk of further municipal bankruptcies. Quite simply, the Bay Area has too many cities, and if serious steps aren't taken to consider all options – from sharing services, to merging municipalities and even disincorporation – the list of bankruptcies is certain to grow.

The nine counties of the Bay Area are home to 6.9 million residents, living in 101 cities. By contrast, Los Angeles County has nearly 10 million residents living in 88 cities, while Orange County's 34 cities represent 3 million residents. Over a third of Bay Area cities have populations of less than 20,000 residents, and nearly a quarter are smaller than 10,000 citizens. Among these are more than a few micro-cities like Belvedere, with just over 2,000 residents, and tiny Colma, whose population of just over 1,000 citizens is outnumbered 10-to-1 by a silent majority interred in the town's cemeteries.

Too many cities means wasteful duplication of services. Many Bay Area cities already share or outsource fire protection and are moving to share other services such as police and

maintenance, but this still leaves plenty of pointless duplication. A hundred and one cities inevitably means too many mayors, city councils, city managers, administrators, town halls, maintenance yards and all the other costly trappings that make a city a city.

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