

# Opinion: California, where less costs more

By Joe Mathews

Pay more and get less.

That's the bad new California deal that underpins so many daily transactions. The price of the fundamentals of life keeps going up, even as our money buys less of them.



Joe Mathews

Watch your water bill rise even as you take shorter showers and let the lawn die. Reach deeper into your pocket to pay for electricity even as you switch to energy efficient light bulbs and appliances. Borrow twice as much for tuition at a state university even as you struggle to find enough classes to graduate in four years.

More for less defines our collective spending. We raise local taxes so that the cuts in library hours or police force won't be as bad as originally planned. The state is paying more to house fewer criminals in its prisons. We pay more in tolls to cross the same decaying bridges.

And don't get me started on California schools. We raised state taxes in 2012 to help education, but you'd be hard-pressed to see that money in more classes or instruction time at your kid's school. Much of it went to cover yesterday's

IOUs and teacher pensions and salaries. Public schools constantly demand more money from parents to compensate for budget cuts or cover costs. At this fall's back to school night at our local elementary, parents were on the business end of no fewer than half-a-dozen fundraising pitches, including a strongly suggested donation of \$125 for classroom supplies.

This "more for less" ethic seems out of step with a time when so many consumer goods—and almost anything involving technology—cost less and provide more in applications or computing power. "More for less" is also a frustrating dynamic for those of us in professions—like mine, journalism—where people work more but are paid less.

"More for less" in California is the consequence of long-term trends and public policies. The gist: Generations of excessive frugality and underinvestment have created various forms of scarcity in public services. The response to that scarcity is conservation, which is expensive in two ways. For one, higher prices can force people to use less of something. For another, successful conservation can force prices up.

The drought provides the most prominent example. The state asked us to conserve water, so we buy less water from the agencies that provide it. But that means less money for water providers, who raise prices to make up the difference.

There has been too little pushback against this "more for less" reality. And our politicians have been skillful at selling both higher payment and lower service as forms of civic virtue. Gov. Jerry Brown, who is especially good at this kind of spin, this year said at a June event on water that "you have to find a more elegant way of relating to material things. You have to use them with greater sensitivity and sophistication."

That's beautiful bunk. There is nothing sophisticated or

sensitive about charging someone more for less of the same thing. And at the risk of being inelegant, I must point out that it isn't fair to be adding new minimum costs for life's basics in a state with the nation's highest poverty rate.

California is a proudly progressive place where majorities are wisely willing to pay more for social goods. But we shouldn't be played for fools. Which is why we need a clear, collective stand: When we must pay more, we must get more.

The right time to establish a firm "More for More" public ethic would be next year, as we consider several ballot measures to raise taxes.

Ask yourself as you read about each tax: Will this new levy really produce more revenues that can be tapped to pay for the schools, health and other programs we all depend on? Or will it merely take money from our pockets and siphon it to the narrow causes of the initiative sponsors?

Among the initiatives filed so far, a proposed tobacco tax—backed by doctors, health groups, and the billionaire Tom Steyer—looks like a more for less. It puts the proposed new tax dollars into the funds of politically favored programs, and even includes a new constitutional prohibition against any of the new taxes going to the general fund, which supports core state programs.

Such more-for-less schemes are not just bad policy. They inspire cynicism and undermine trust—and thus make it harder to get people to pay for the expensive new investments California will need to support its people, grow its economy, and tackle big challenges like climate change.

"More for less" will lead us into the trap of being cheap. Let's not go there. Instead, we need to be firmer about getting more of what we pay for.

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