

Opinion: Calif. needs to rethink county government

By Joe Mathews

Wherever you live in California, your county probably doesn't fit you.

Many counties are too small; 24 of the 58 California counties have populations less than 140,000, the population of my hometown of Pasadena. Some counties are too sprawling; it can take more than three hours to get across Riverside and San Bernardino counties.



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And in the big metropolitan regions where most of us live, counties—which are supposed to be the state's form of regional government—divide our communities, instead of uniting them. The Bay Area is sliced up between nine counties. The capital region around Sacramento includes four counties. Greater Los Angeles is a mash-up of five counties, with no clear geographic divides between them. I dare you to drive through four neighboring cities in four different counties—Yorba Linda in Orange, Chino in San Bernardino, Corona in Riverside, and Diamond Bar in Los Angeles—and tell me when you cross from one county to another.

It has become commonplace in California to complain that our state is simply too big to work effectively as one entity, and

to suggest, via ballot initiative (as in venture capitalist Tim Draper's "Six Californias" scheme) or petition to the Legislature (as the North State counties are doing) that we be split up into a number of different states. But creating new states would require congressional approval, making these ideas non-starters.

Instead, we could redesign our counties all by ourselves, without Washington's help.

The heart of the problem is that California's antiquated design, with its 58 counties drawn haphazardly more than a century ago, doesn't make sense today, if it ever did. Indeed, the way that our counties divide us up is part of a larger fragmentation in California, where the problem is not big government but so many small and stupid governments—more than 6,000 in total, with 480 cities and thousands of special districts that few Californians know anything about.

This fragmentation of regions is not merely a problem of having untidy maps that make little sense to the people who live on them. Research shows that regions that are split up among many governments—as California's are—have less affordable housing and more sprawl, congestion, and segregation than those with more consolidated regional governance.

"The excessive competition triggered by political fragmentation encourages local jurisdictions to pursue socially and economically undesirable policies," wrote the University of Minnesota's Myron Orfield and Baris Dawes in a paper delivered last month at Chapman University in Orange. "Cities steal malls and office parks from each other, fight tax incentive wars for auto malls, and zone out the poor for fiscal advantage in a process rife with haphazard planning and NIMBY biases. ... With jobs scattered like buckshot, transit, a cleaner environment, and basic opportunity for lower-income Americans become harder, not easier, to accomplish."

The good news is that, in recent years, there has been more thinking in California about how to remake local governments, including counties. Some of the best of this thinking is summarized in retired Silicon Valley executive Thom Bryant's book, "California 2.0".

"California 2.0" shows that our biggest challenges are regional: environmental systems, infrastructure, economic development, transit, and housing. And the book points out that the state already divides us into regions for certain ways of collecting data or governing us; California has 10 biodiversity regions, nine water regions, 15 air basins. But our counties don't match up with these regions.

So "California 2.0" argues for consolidating counties so that each region of the state would be one county. There would be 19 in the author's ideal structure, though "California 2.0" suggests that even the old Spanish military's 10 territorial districts would fit California better than today's 58 counties.

If California were to embrace regionally consolidated government, it would be following a trend. France has been consolidating and empowering its regions, and some metropolitan regions, notably Toronto, have consolidated urban and suburban governments.

Such regional counties would need more power to devise regional solutions to the state's most pressing problems: schools, traffic, and housing. And, as "California 2.0" argues, they'd need expanded boards of supervisors and elected county executives to improve democratic accountability.

And if California politicians are to be taken seriously as they lead a one-state war on climate change, they'll need to embrace truly regional counties to make any progress. Today's state regulations on climate are unlikely to show much in results, in part because they require coordination between our

fragmented local governments. But if we had counties that actually fit our regions, California might have a fighting chance of saving the world.

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