

Opinion: Calif. needs a one-stop government shop

By Joe Mathews

I want nothing from California governments—except whatever I need right now.

So why, in this Internet age, doesn't my state offer a one-stop shop where I can renew my driver's license, register to vote, research state records, pay my taxes, and buy passes to a state park?



Joe Mathews

Mine is not a new notion. To the contrary, the one-shop stop is one of the oldest ideas in California governance—a staple of candidate position papers and commission reports. In the last year, California worthies have suggested one-stop online shops for poor people to sign up for multiple public assistance programs at once, for businesses to handle all their permitting and licensing, and for California parents signing up for child care.

“Imagine if Californians had one personalized log-in account to manage all their business with the state, from updating address information and voter registration to paying taxes and applying for and managing benefits,” the Little Hoover Commission, the state's independent oversight agency, suggested recently. “And they could do it all from a mobile

device while taking the bus to soccer practice or at home after putting their children to bed for the night.”

These are sweet dreams, kids. But, like the Holy Grail, the effective California one-stop shop exists only in the realm of myth.

Why?

My one-stop answer: California has too many governments—literally thousands of them—and nearly every single one sees compliance with its separate standards and rules as a way to protect its very existence.

Indeed, our state governing system seems designed with the opposite of one-stop shopping as its guiding principle. California has more permitting agencies than most other states, all sorts of regional bodies, incentives for endless litigation, and the California Environmental Quality Act, which can kill almost any worthwhile project.

Hence, a paradox: Californians need one-stop shops to deal with the government because of the very inefficiencies that make creating one-stop shops nearly impossible here.

This paradox is also why the idea of the one-stop shop is so very useful. It's an essential dodge for politicians and governments that have no real interest in doing the hard work of consolidating agencies and redesigning government to make it more efficient for taxpayers. Given the dysfunction these one-stop shops are proposed to mask, it's hardly surprising that they never make it very far off the ground. When the state does launch a one-stop shop, it's often incomplete (the California Business Portal provides good information but no single form to register your business) or makes so many mistakes that it produces new industries to help you navigate it (like the Covered California health insurance exchange).

The private sector has developed what are effectively one-stop

shops—but those are rare and require a corporate dictator, like Amazon's Jeff Bezos or Uber's Travis Kalanick, crazed enough to destroy old industries. The few governments around the world able to pull off the one-stop shop don't have America's system of divided government. Check out Great Britain's miraculous GOV.UK, and dream of a California parliament.

For now, the best option available to those who want customer-friendly service in California is to hire consultants and lobbyists. The absence of a one-stop shop has been a boon to such influence peddlers, whose numbers keep growing.

Which gives me an idea. If California governments won't give us a one-stop shop for the state, the least they can do is provide Californians with their own fixers. That's right—concierges for all. With a ballot measure, we could make concierge service a constitutional right.

California government has experimented with concierge-style service before. Veterans of Pete Wilson's administration talk about "Red Teams"—essentially, concierges for companies—they organized in the 1990s. But concierges-for-all would be much costlier, with most of the approximately 100,000 (my best estimate) concierges being private contractors rather than government employees (we couldn't afford the pensions).

These concierges wouldn't have to wear uniforms or golden-key badges like hotel concierges—unless they were into that sort of thing. But each California adult would be assigned a concierge; we'd each receive our concierge's email and cell phone, and we could put him or her on speed dial like we do with the plumber or the dentist. These concierges would have to respond to our requests in 48 hours, and state and local officials would have to respond to their requests in 24 hours. Our concierges would have the power to secure permits and licenses, make appointments for us with any government official, or even schedule visits to our relatives who might

be doing time in state prisons.

Call it a dream if you like, but it's no less dreamy than a one-stop shop. Really, I want nothing from California government, except somebody whose job it is to get me whatever I need right now.

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