

Opinion: More people should retire like Vin Scully

By Joe Mathews

If only more Californians could retire like Vin.

Vin Scully, that is. The Hall of Fame announcer for the Los Angeles Dodgers called his last game Sunday, a month shy of his 89th birthday. That retirement has touched off a national celebration of Scully's announcing mastery and his contributions to baseball through 67 years with the Dodgers.



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But what deserves more attention—including from Californians who couldn't care less about sports—is the smart, progressive way he planned his retirement.

In this country, retirements are often abrupt. People depart the workforce suddenly and at a time decided by numbers—a company rule, a buyout, Social Security calculations or retirement benefit formulas—not what's best for retirees or the workplaces they're leaving.

Scully's retirement, by contrast, was anything but abrupt. He phased in his departure over two decades. Back in the mid 1990s, as he approached the age of 70, Scully—who in his prime announced not just Dodger games but also national football, baseball and golf—pared back his duties. He focused solely on

baseball, then dropped national broadcasting. Then, a decade ago, he gradually reduced his Dodger obligations, mostly by limiting his travel to road games. In his final year, he has worked home games almost exclusively.

Describing this long phase-out, Scully once said, "I would like to disappear like the Cheshire Cat, where ... the only thing left is a smile."

The Cheshire Cat Strategy has been a success. Scully has remained robust, his sharp, wide-ranging observations carrying nine innings of a game—solo—with characteristic ease. The myriad tributes to him now emphasize how his knowledge and long memory have made him a back-office resource to the nation's second most-valuable baseball team. And fans treasure how he's connected them and their families across more than three generations.

Could Scully's phased retirement be a model for other Californians? The question might seem daft. After all, this state famously thinks little about its older citizens (Scully is a special case), preferring to celebrate younger technologists and stars who "disrupt" the established. And retirement has become one of California's nastiest legal and political minefields, especially when the conversation turns to pensions and retiree health care for government workers.

These pension wars leave little room for a conversation about how we might make the so-called golden years better for all of us—for retirees, for businesses, for governments. But that's precisely the conversation California needs to have.

Our state is rapidly aging; the number of people 65 and older is projected to nearly double by 2030, while immigration is flat and our birth rate declining. So California urgently needs its most senior citizens to be more productive.

Instead, we watch as valuable baby boomer workers retire, leaving huge voids of knowledge and skill that can't easily be

filled. Government agencies in particular are finding it hard to hire and retain replacements for retirees who had specialized knowledge and high-level skills. New hires too often leave after they're trained, because they can make more money in the private sector.

Part of the answer to this problem lies in Scully's example: we must make it possible for valuable workers to stick around into late old age. The central principle is flexibility: the ability to mix varying levels of work with life in a way that makes both better.

But our retirement and work systems aren't agile enough. To the contrary, they're highly complicated, so full of rules that designing a flexible schedule, while legally possible, can be more trouble than it's worth.

Legal scholars advise me that legislation would be needed to establish a new category for workers who want flexible, phased retirements in the public sector. So I hereby propose that California governments create the Vin Scully Phased Retirement Plan. When employees reach retirement age, they should be able to enter into a phased plan, subject to the approval of their supervisors, which could be altered by mutual agreement. The details could get complicated, but one goal of the Scully Plan should be to ensure that phased retirement neither hurt, nor spiked, the employee's retirement benefits.

Phased retirements are hardly new. Just ask emeritus professors or senior-status judges. And they make sense. Why should a state that has paid employees for so long completely lose the benefit of their experience and knowledge? And maintaining connections to work and colleagues can be good for retirees, keeping minds sharp and even extending lives, some research suggests.

"Hang in there," is cliché, in sports and life. But it would represent real progress as a principle for reorganizing how we

work late in life. “All I know,” Vin Scully recently said, “is I’m eternally grateful for having been allowed to work so many games.”

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