

Opinion: Importance of Central Valley

By Joe Mathews

Are you finally growing up, Sacramento?

I pose that question not to our state government, but to the real Sacramento, the capital region. It's a query that also should be aimed at the Central Valley's other big urban areas.



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The maturity of Fresno, Bakersfield or Stockton is not just a local question. The valley persistently lags California as a whole in employment, access to health care, and educational attainment. If California is going to make big gains, valley cities will have to lead the way.

Unfortunately, this narrative, which should be conventional wisdom, still feels novel. That's because the valley still thinks of itself as agricultural. That's understandable, given the region's rural history and the outsized influence agriculture retains over land use and politics. But that influence obscures the 21st century reality—most people in the Central Valley live in cities, the true economic engines of the region.

Valley cities are “small” only compared with the global mega-regions on the coast. More people live in the cities of Fresno

and Sacramento than in the cities of Atlanta or Miami. And valley cities have grown into places far larger and more complicated than the governments and infrastructure that once sustained them. One great underappreciated drama in California is the race of these cities to catch up to their urban needs, by adding cultural venues, revamping downtowns, and developing new infrastructure.

Cities are in different stages of this process. The struggle in Fresno has been particularly dramatic. There is new life and housing in its downtown. A new bicycle and hiking trail will connect Fresno to Clovis, and a bus rapid transit system is being launched. Planning is under way to establish mixed-use zoning districts on major thoroughfares.

But the most promising—and often most puzzling—urban case is Sacramento.

The capital region has long had advantages that give it a more diverse economy than other valley cities—from the presence of the state government to its proximity to the Bay Area. But for much of its history it coasted, happily lagging the fast-growing coast.

Today, it's a bigger, more ambitious place: The nine counties of the larger region together have 2.8 million residents, on par with the city of Chicago. The past decade has brought more than \$1 billion in public and private investment to Sacramento's center. A sports arena opened last year, a hospital is planned for the railyards and midtown Sacramento's neighborhoods are livelier than ever.

But beyond these gains, the picture is as muddy as the valley rivers.

A Sacramento leadership class heavy in real estate and state government types has a weakness for seeking validation—and outside visitors—with showy projects of dubious value, the same strategy that contributed to Stockton's bankruptcy. Among

their current ideas are building an aquarium and expanding the struggling convention center.

Outside the city, getting the disparate parts of the capital region to work together remains difficult. While there are recent examples of regional progress on transportation, water, and workforce development, the capital region is not naturally cohesive. There's not even a consensus on how many of the area's counties are part of the region. The Sacramento Bee says there are four, government documents often refer to six counties, while a few philanthropists and academics list nine.

One of Sacramento's disadvantages as a region is its political diversity; unlike the Democrat-dominated Bay Area, Sacramento is a swing region, from the left-wing NIMBYs of Davis to the Republican NIMBYS of the foothills. Another challenge to developing urban strategy is all the people who live in the so-called UnCity— unincorporated Sacramento County.

This lack of clear identity has made it harder for greater Sacramento to address its most stubborn regional problems, from housing affordability to transit. Sacramento County voters defeated a transportation sales tax hike in November that would have restored previous service cuts. And the lack of job growth in the region deserves greater attention. The Brookings Institution ranks Sacramento 95th among the nation's largest 100 metro regions in economic output per capita, with a 9.5 percent decrease over the past 10 years.

Sacramento's optimists argue that efforts to address such regional problems are deepening. They also point to Sacramento's new mayor, Darrell Steinberg, a former legislative leader with deep contacts among the overlapping governments of the region. To the good, Steinberg has made decreasing homelessness a priority, and is addressing it regionally, in a way that should force Sacramento County to offer more mental health services. (To the bad, he is pushing the aquarium idea.)

Californians are understandably wary when big plans emerge from the Capitol. But we should be rooting hard for the capital region. Our state will be much better off if Sacramento can fully launch itself.

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