

# Opinion: Listen more than you talk

By Joe Mathews

What do we do now, Nelson Rising?

I pose that question not just because this is a confusing era. And not just because no living Californian is better than Nelson Rising—developer, lawyer, civic leader—at navigating our state’s complexities.



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“What do we do now?” is the question that concludes the 1972 film “The Candidate,” in which Robert Redford plays an idealistic U.S. Senate candidate corrupted by the political process. Rising, who ran the successful 1970 U.S. Senate campaign of John Tunney, was a producer on the film. When Redford wins unexpectedly, he plaintively asks his campaign manager, “What do we do now?” The manager has no answer.

Fortunately, Rising, 75, has some reassuring answers about today’s California. And if you don’t know the name Nelson Rising, don’t worry—that’s the point.

Nelson Rising’s story is about all the big things you can get done in California if you’re willing to listen more than you

talk, and don't much care about taking credit.

Rising has done more big things in California than can fit in a short column. You could start with downtown L.A.'s Library Tower, long the tallest building in the state (it will be soon be surpassed by the new Wilshire Grand Center). You could throw in Playa Vista (the heart of Silicon Beach), and add San Francisco's Mission Bay, the largest mixed-use development in that city's history.

But then you'd still be leaving out dozens of major developments like the mixed-use Santa Fe towers in San Diego and Orange County's planned community, Coto de Caza. "He is to blame for The Real Housewives of Orange County," says Rising's son Chris.

Beyond buildings, Rising managed the campaign of Tom Bradley, L.A.'s transformational mayor, and during a Northern California stint, chaired the Federal Reserve Bank of San Francisco, and the Bay Area Council.

Rising's remarkable career stands as a rejoinder to the maddening conventional wisdom of today's California: that you can't do big things in our state because everything is too complicated, regulated and expensive. Any big project requires dealing with too many different constituencies, goes the argument. Who has time to talk with everyone, much less accommodate all the stakeholders?

Nelson Rising makes the time.

Rising says that if you're willing to talk with everybody and to accommodate every opponent, you can still accomplish great things. That's not conventional wisdom today, when civic contests are often about rallying one's base of supporters, while discouraging one's opponents. But he says Bradley, L.A.'s first African American mayor, succeeded because he went everywhere and engaged everyone, making even opponents comfortable.

“I enjoy communication, and the best part of communication is listening. Many people don’t do that,” says Rising. “I always start the conversation by asking, ‘What’s your concern? Why don’t you want me to do this development? And if I can figure out a way to solve your concern, will you be supportive of it?’”

Such modesty suits the man, the polar opposite of the real estate developer in the White House. Rising’s parents never attended college; he went from Glendale High to UCLA on scholarship. He’s been married to the same woman for 53 years.

And he’s succeeded by embracing conversation and complexity. He made the Library Tower happen by arranging a complicated swap of air rights between the project and L.A.’s Central Library. To win approval for the Playa Vista project, he visited Westchester homeowners in their living rooms to address anger about multi-unit housing in his plan.

In San Francisco’s Mission Bay, Rising, then CEO of Catellus, took over a troubled development and satisfied local concerns with affordable housing and a 43-acre donation to UC San Francisco. The development was approved without opposition or environmental litigation. In thanks, San Francisco named a street in Mission Bay after the Los Angeles developer—Nelson Rising Lane.

Today, Rising, having flunked retirement, remains in business with his son. They are raising a social impact fund for investments in buildings that produce less carbon and incorporate technology.

Rising still works in the historic Beaux Arts PacMutual complex that he restored and then sold in 2015. His firm has since purchased 433 S. Spring, an Art Deco building where Rising began his career as an O’Melveny lawyer. The firm is working in L.A., San Diego, and San Francisco, and eyeing Sacramento, where the Risings have been impressed with

downtown's growth. He's bullish on California. "The state's economy is poised to keep exceeding the country," he says.

So what do we do now, California? We follow Rising's singular example: listen to each other—and recommit to doing big things that endure.

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