

Opinion: What a true progressive city looks like

By Joe Mathews

Adjust your California maps: The little dot marking Santa Rosa needs to be a lot bigger.

Dramatic changes in housing, aging, transportation, and criminal justice are altering the Golden State's geography, and no place in California stands to benefit more than Santa Rosa.



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The Sonoma County seat seems poised to become the most successful example of a type of urban center—the rapidly growing midsize city that serves as a crossroads between major regions. The city's current motto—"Out There. In the Middle of Everything"—encapsulates the new and paradoxical centrality of edge cities, from Fairfield and Santa Clarita to Riverside and Escondido. In an era when California's coastal regions have soured on motherhood (by making children and housing prohibitively expensive) and apple pie (too much sugar and not locally grown), these edge cities are bastions of hoary traditions like economic growth and middle-class opportunity.

"We're on the move and we're interested in growing," says Santa Rosa city councilmember Julie Combs of her town.

As the fifth-largest city in the Bay Area, Santa Rosa, population 175,000, plays many roles. It's the northern spillover area for people and businesses seeking refuge from the closer-in Bay Area's higher costs. Employers like it too; the city now boasts 88,000 jobs, its highest employment level ever.

And by dint of geography and deliberate strategy, the city is emerging as California's weed crossroads—or, in the words used by the city, the “farm-to-market” center for medical and recreational marijuana, connecting the cannabis growers of the North State with the retailers and consumers of the Bay Area and points south.

While many other California cities have decided to limit the marijuana industry, Santa Rosa has rapidly issued permits for cannabis operations, creating a run on warehouse space. What the city wants is higher-wage professional jobs—in sales, finance, distribution or lab testing—that the newly legal \$22 billion-a-year industry will require.

And while Marin County to the south is famously anti-growth, Santa Rosa has been busily preparing for the new people heading its way. In downtown Santa Rosa, there are plans for taller buildings, including a hotel. Santa Rosa's once-tiny airport is expanding to handle double its number of travelers by the end of the next decade. The first 43 miles of a new 70-mile commuter rail line, the SMART train, opened this summer, connecting Santa Rosa to San Rafael, and, eventually, the ferry to San Francisco.

The City Council has distinguished itself by making housing its top priority, with a multi-phase plan that promises more housing both for younger families and seniors. The city has put its own money into affordable housing, is working with the county to establish a housing trust, and is encouraging denser, taller construction—while still preserving its urban growth boundaries. Santa Rosa also has responded aggressively

to rising homelessness—declaring a local state of emergency that allows for flexibility in zoning to help house people quickly.

All of this progress has been helped by a series of inclusive community conversations, some called Santa Rosa Together, in recent years. The community's cohesion opened the door to an extraordinary step: absorbing Roseland and other poorer communities on the city's southwest side, with the goal of giving them a greater political voice and better services. Expected to be complete by November, the annexation, which includes 715 acres and 8,000 people, is billed as the largest such expansion in the city's history.

All this change can be jarring for some Santa Rosans, particularly longtime residents accustomed to a smaller town that identified itself with the cartoon strip Peanuts. Its author, Charles M. Schulz, spent much of his adult life in the area, which named the airport after him. Santa Rosa still remains home to a Charles M. Schulz Museum, part of a complex that includes an ice rink.

But the world is changing. MetLife last year fired Snoopy and the Peanuts gang after 30 years of sponsorship, and the Peanuts brand was sold off to a Canadian company. And Santa Rosans will soon have to adjust to living in a city of 200,000, rather than the 1970 town of 50,000.

Next year, Santa Rosa will celebrate the sesquicentennial of its incorporation it's also the 75th anniversary of Santa Rosa's most famous star turn, in Alfred Hitchcock's classic "Shadow of a Doubt." Hitchcock—who would recognize the old train station, but not much else about the city now—portrayed Santa Rosa as such a small, out-of-the-way place that the serial killer played by Joseph Cotton could hide there without fear of detection.

Today, the geography of 21st-century California makes Santa

Rosa inescapable.

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