

Opinion: Oprah for Santa Barbara County supervisor

Dear Oprah,

You might become a fine president. But you and your state, California, would be better off if you ran for Santa Barbara County supervisor instead.

That's no joke. If you want to tackle our nation's greatest problems, there's no need to trudge through the D.C. swamps. You can stay right at home in your Montecito mansion.



Joe Mathews

A local government position in a small place 90 miles north of L.A. might sound like a comedown for a billionaire. It isn't. For all its wealth and natural beauty, your county of 445,000 is now the most challenged place in California. That was true even before two recent disasters—the massive Thomas Fire that forced you to evacuate, and the subsequent mudslides that killed 20 people— occasioned soul-searching about emergency response, infrastructure, and development in the county.

I realize that being a local politician was the furthest thing from your mind in 2001 when you bought a 42-acre spread there and named it The Promised Land, a nod to Martin Luther King Jr.'s final speech in 1968. No, you loved the idea of Santa Barbara as a magical quasi-island on the land—a place cut off from the world by the sea and the mountains, but still close

enough to take a lunch meeting in Hollywood.

But that geographic isolation makes Santa Barbara's problems more complex and costlier. Consider the area's chronic water troubles. Santa Barbara remains in drought even after last winter's rains. Why? The landscape that makes Santa Barbara so dramatically beautiful—high mountains next to the ocean—also makes it hard to capture water.

When rain lands, it rushes out to sea, too quickly to be captured by reservoirs or seep into the aquifer. Rising ocean water is seeping into the region's freshwater supply. Santa Barbara has responded by buying more water and installing a desalination plant. (This is why your laidback neighbor The Dude—Jeff Bridges—was reportedly angry when he learned you had dug a new well on your property.)

Santa Barbara also lacks strong infrastructure to connect it to the rest of the state (the 101 is a parking lot, the Amtrak train is slow, and the airport has been losing flights). And county government is hamstrung by persistent budget shortfalls. (It could use your Midas touch.)

This reflects the area's badly imbalanced economy. Santa Barbara, which mixes wealthy transplants and low-wage workers in agriculture and tourism, has the second worst income inequality in California after the Bay Area. And by advanced statistics—which account for Santa Barbara's high housing costs and its people's relatively low levels of income from government programs—it has the highest childhood poverty rate in California.

Santa Barbara poverty looks different than the poverty you grew up with in Milwaukee. But it's damaging nonetheless.

Drive up to Santa Maria, the county's most populous city. You'll see pretty parks and single-family homes. But when you knock on doors, you'll discover two and three families packed into many houses. You'll also hear plenty of concerns about

crime in neighborhoods with high murder rates. And you'll also find children who can seem cut off from their beautiful region.

So, while you're there, make some young friends and drive west on Main Street until you reach the Rancho Guadalupe Dunes Preserve, a county park that sits right on the ocean. You'll find that many Santa Maria kids, haven't experienced the roaring waves or the 550-foot dunes, the tallest on the West Coast, even though they live 10 miles away.

That's the kind of thing you could do as a county supervisor that you couldn't do as president.

Yes, the White House offers awesome power. But you'd also find yourself constrained by partisan polarization. To take that job, you'd have to give up your media empire—unless you want to be criticized and investigated as ceaselessly as the self-enriching current president is.

As a county supervisor, you could keep your businesses while serving your community. You'd be less constrained in pursuing your agenda—county supervisors in California are both the legislative and executive branches, so supes who can collaborate with colleagues can make a ton of difference.

And then there's the power of your example. Americans spend far too much time obsessing over the madness of our crazy national politics, while ignoring the more fundamental and important work of local governance. You, by becoming a local supervisor, would inspire imitators all over the country.

You've been successful in life because of your ability to bridge the experiences and aspirations of the wealthy and the poor, the fortunate and the not so fortunate. Santa Barbara County needs more bridges like that. Is there any higher public service than to save the place you call home?

Your fellow Californian,

Joe Mathews

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