

Opinion: Welcome to Joeville, California

By Joe Mathews

A startup founder asked me: What would you do if you were starting a California city?

My first answer: Get my head examined.



Joe Mathews

For 40 years, the state government and California voters have steadily reduced the revenues and limited the discretion of municipal governments. Our newest cities—like Menifee in Riverside County—have struggled to survive.

Then I reconsidered. No, I don't believe in the advanced digital cities that technologists at Google or Y Combinator want to conjure. But maybe you could form a successful California city—by exploiting California's present-day realities, rather than bowing to them.

I certainly know how I wouldn't start a new city: by electing a city government, making laws, or hiring the police and firefighters whose salaries and benefits swallow municipal budgets whole. And I wouldn't build housing to attract residents, at least not at first.

Instead, I'd start my California city—call it Joeville—by bringing on board the most important person in any California

city: the developer.

Spit out your coffee if you must, but cities thrive or wither by the quality of their developers. California laws on open meetings greatly restrict the power of public officials to talk freely and legally with each other. As a result, developers become vital communication hubs, the head coaches through which municipal players communicate and plan.

What would my developer develop first? If you want a great California city, you should start with a research university.

It's no accident that highly successful Irvine got a University of California campus in 1965, six years before the city incorporated in 1971. Universities transform smaller towns. La Jolla was a Navy retirement village before it got a UC campus and became an international center for technology.

Universities perform many roles: They are economic engines, provide a look for their cities, and address social challenges. If you doubt their impact, consider San Bernardino and Riverside, as James and Deborah Fallows do in their new book, "Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey Into the Heart of America."

"Riverside and San Bernardino were similar-sized cities with similar economic prospects at the end of World War II," they write. "Their prospects began diverging in the 1960s—Riverside's up, San Bernardino's down—when Riverside was chosen as the site of a new University of California campus and San Bernardino was not."

I'd put Joeville's university in the city center, not on the outskirts as the UC did with its Merced campus. I'd have my university run the local school district—which would create an opportunity to start a teachers' college there.

With the schools in place, the developer could develop a tax base. Under California's misbegotten tax system, the best

cities are often those that can collect the most sales taxes. That's why retail-poor San Jose, for all its rich homeowners, has a poor city government, and the city of Cerritos, with its auto mall, is rich.

My city would be designed around the two highly attractive retailers that produce huge sales, and taxes: Costco and an Apple store. I'd try to attach the Apple store to a luxury hotel so that I could tax its rooms, too.

You probably think that, at this point, we'd establish a city government, to set up services. Think again. Local officials in California are so weak as to be useless. I'd rather have citizens take the lead.

California's preeminent expert on local participation, Pete Peterson, dean of Pepperdine University's School of Public Policy, offered a number of suggestions for Joeville. First, it should be a charter city with its own mission statement, drafted by citizens and recited annually. Peterson suggests residents should attend a multi-day "Citizens Academy" where they would learn the basics of municipal government, including budgeting, so they could run the place themselves.

Peterson says that Joeville could increase citizen engagement through its design. To encourage neighbors to get to know each other, city code might require porches to be built on the fronts of houses, with no attached garages.

Once Joeville's citizens are engaged, we'd be free to set up whatever municipal departments are required. Joeville wouldn't be afraid to contract out services, especially expensive police and fire, so as to have more money to spend on libraries, parks and recreation.

Now, you're probably thinking: Wouldn't Joeville be stopped in its tracks by California regulation and litigation? Yes, which is why we'd lobby state legislators to have the entire city declared a stadium—not for sports, but for civic

experimentation. The state, you see, routinely gives regulatory exemptions to stadiums.

Joeville still needs financing. In the meantime, California's nearly 500 cities, struggling under the state's fiscal and governing restrictions, might adopt Joeville's civic motto: "You'll Never Win If You Play By California's Rules."

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