Opinion: Cracking down on crime, blight

By Brian Uhler

Great news: Compared to last year, our violent crime rate is down 41 percent; from 112 occurrences in 2014 to 66 in 2015.

The news is not all good. Our property crime rate is up 6 percent; from 516 in 2014 to 548 in 2015. This was not unexpected as we reported on a significant upward trend in property crime six months ago. Total crime is down 2.2 percent over last year.

Brian Uhler

Last summer and fall, we noticed a significant rise in bicycle thefts along with other thefts. It is our belief that a contributing factor is “loosening” of the laws and penalties for committing property crime – AB109 and Proposition 47. We will continue our effort this spring through the use of “bait” bikes and crime-prevention property marking programs like microdots.

Homicide case

On Jan. 30, police responded to a homicide. In this case, a robbery stemming from a marijuana deal led to the shooting death of 40 year old Dennis Wright Jr. The work on this case has been ongoing with the arrest of four suspects and warrants

for two others pending. In such cases, we have the duty to follow every lead and solve the case. To do so our detectives have worked tirelessly and we have been fortunate to have support from other law enforcement organizations to include the El Dorado District Attorney's Office, SLEDNET, the El Dorado County Sheriff's Department and law enforcement professionals from Benicia, Fairfield, Vallejo, Contra Costa Sheriff's Department and several others which cannot be named to preserve the integrity of the ongoing investigation.

Spring cleaning—code enforcement

This year we are planning to bolster community awareness regarding the city's physical appearance—especially in the area of our most traveled and visited Highway 50 corridor. Here's the plan: working with community members and staff members, we are developing a Visual Appeal Index. With this we will grade individual properties and our city as a whole. After the grading phase, we plan notify property owners of the results to include positive reinforcement elements for nice-looking businesses and useful information to improve a given business' appearance. As you might expect, we will take action if in the course of doing this work we discover violations of existing code. We're from the government and we're here to help.

Brian Uhler is the South Lake Tahoe police chief.

Opinion: Heroin turning soup kitchen into an ER

By Bill Burns

In August, she drove two miles, past a large hospital, to get her boyfriend to our soup kitchen, but not for the food. She knew someone here would have Narcan, a life-saving overdose-reversing drug that, until recently, was unavailable here in Maine to people at risk of overdosing.

Her boyfriend was bluish and slumped over the passenger side of the van when he arrived. Brittney, a caseworker, administered Narcan and he survived.

Sternal rubs. Rescue breathing. Intra-nasal application of Narcan. These are the lexicons of emergency personnel—people whose job it is to save lives during desperate times. Increasingly, and unexpectedly, these words have also become part of the unofficial job description for me and other social workers at the Preble Street Resource Center in downtown Portland, Maine.

With so many clients at risk of heroin and opiate addiction, we are the new first responders.

We are also the last responders: We've had so many clients die that we've gotten good at compassionate grief. We've become experts at the well-staged memorial service. Two hundred and fifty Mainers reportedly died of heroin and opiate overdoses in 2015, up from 176 in 2013. Over the past six months, we've responded to more than a dozen overdoses in our space, and held roughly the same number of memorial services for people we know who died on the street.

I began my career as a social worker with high ideals. Fresh out of Africa and the Peace Corps in the late 1980s, I wanted to apply "practical idealism" to alleviate the suffering of others, especially homeless people. I started working in a New York City children's shelter in the South Bronx, moved to running shelters in other cities, and finally came to work in Portland, population 66,000, five years ago. Preble Street is a shelter where people can breathe and find connection,

community, and support. We serve 1,100 meals a day and work with 1,200 clients a year. By providing a pair of socks, a shower, and a hot meal, we strive to create meaningful connections with struggling people. We're guided by our founder Joe Kreisler, who said: "Part of my job, part of being alive, is making sure that other people are, too."

The high risk of death by heroin and opiates has changed our work—and in a way changed who we are. We've had to modify bathrooms that promised a homeless person some modicum of privacy, by cutting 10 inch gaps at the bottom of the doors and installing a light system that lets us know if someone has stopped moving. We didn't want to do this, but we've simply had too many people who stopped breathing in those bathrooms. The pressure we feel as the final stop before someone dies is too real to stick with our ideals about dignity.

In October, we had a woman who—sitting on the toilet, pants around her ankles, needle in neck—was unresponsive and barely breathing. We screamed her name, scraping our knuckles across her sternum. Quick-thinking staff, the overdose response protocol, and another client with Narcan saved her life. Later that week, she came back, embarrassed, sorry for causing us such worry, and said she'd secured a rare bed in a detox unit and was on her way to recovery and a changed life. The near miss reminded us that dead addicts don't recover—that's our mantra these days.

Maybe heroin used to be perceived as an inner city thing, but today, high rates of drug overdoses are occurring in rural and impoverished counties. Nearly 90 percent of people who tried heroin for the first time in the past decade were white, and the highest use rates were among those making less than $20,000 per year.

Maine is poor, rural, and white—and at the epicenter of what we call an "epidemic." The number of people addicted to heroin nationally has more than doubled in a decade, from 214,000 in

2002 to 517,000 in 2013, according to a study released this year by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration. But we do not respond to this epidemic the way we would if, say, the number of measles deaths had more than doubled in the same period. Instead of a medical response, the opiate-heroin epidemic gets a moral one: Calls for more arrests, punishment, shaming, the suggestion that offering Narcan will "just encourage them."

Scandalously, the cause of our current problem is not a virus but a series of deliberate policies that combined into disaster. Between 1996 and 2002, pharmaceutical companies marketed opiates as safe, long-term pain relievers. By 2010, the United States, with about 5 percent of the world's population, was consuming 99 percent of the world's hydrocodone (the narcotic in Vicodin), along with 80 percent of the oxycodone (in Percocet and OxyContin). Mainers were prescribed opiates at twice the national rate and soon pain pills were circulating across the state.

When Obamacare began, Maine was the only New England state that did not expand Medicaid, forfeiting more than $300 million in federal funds yearly. Then in January 2013, spending on MaineCare, Maine's Medicaid program, was reduced and 20,000 low-income Mainers lost coverage. Without Medicaid funding, the number of beds in detox programs fell. Now, in Portland, there are only 10 beds for the uninsured.

For those who couldn't get off the opiates, heroin arrived, often cut with more potent and cheaper fentanyl. The number of people who died from heroin in Maine rose from 7 in 2010 to more than 70 in 2015. This has created real dilemmas for my colleagues and me.

The day before yesterday a long-time client asked for $4. He knew we would refuse but he was desperate. With his MaineCare cut, he was no longer able to fill his prescription for suboxone—widely used by people trying to kick heroin. His

choice? Find $4 to buy some suboxone off the street—or go get some heroin, which his dealer would undoubtedly provide for free, welcoming back an old customer with open arms. We held our breath until we saw him the next day, knowing that there was always the chance that we would never see him again.

We're watching the gap between public policy and human need grow wider every day.

In 1848, the great German scientist Rudolph Virchow said that medicine is a social science and politics is nothing more than medicine on a grand scale. That has been the case with opiates and heroin. The people caught between these policies and politics need an alternative to death as a way out.

The first step should be to respond to this crisis like a real epidemic, not a moral failing. We do not need a "war" on addiction.

We need, first of all, to make Narcan more readily available. We need more detox beds, obviously, but also programs that employ, house, and support people who've come out of detox. And we need rational policies from government, business, and medical leaders that improve the health of everyone. The fact that so many Mainers were prescribed opiates in the first place speaks to deeper issues in our health care system.

The most significant thing we can do is take the federal money to expand Medicaid/MaineCare—almost 70 percent of Mainers agree that this makes sense. This one policy would mean more treatment, and more saved lives. This epidemic is taking place not just at my workplace, but in your community and, increasingly, in your family.

Bill Burns is the coordinator of the Resource Center, a program of Preble Street, a social service agency in Portland, Maine. He has also worked with homeless people in San Antonio, Brooklyn, and Philadelphia. He wrote this for Zocalo Public Square.

Opinion: School bonds can be source of scandal

By Dan Walters, Sacramento Bee

Over the last four decades, California has borrowed nearly $45 billion via bonds to finance construction projects for the state's K-12 school districts.

Dan Walters

Repaying the loans with interest has roughly doubled the face value of those bonds. And as Jerry Brown winds down his second governorship, he wants to change the practice.

Public school enrollment has been dropping and is likely to drop even more, Brown says, adding that the state is still paying out $2 billion a year to service old school bonds and construction money has been doled out unfairly, with little regard to true need.

Read the whole story

Letter: Novasel needs to be questioned

To the community,

As you may have heard by now, El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel, cannot vote on, nor participate in planning for, the new Meyers Area Plan as well as the rezoning of the land in Placerville that will be used for the new county courthouse as the Briggs Family Trust owns the land and it is financed through Sue's husband's company.

Kenny Curtzwiler

First, we respect Sue. She's a hard-working woman who clearly cares for her community. However, with the county's and FPPC legal opinion that she cannot participate due to a conflict of interest, our community of Meyers has been left without an elected vote on the plan or any participation. She cannot vote or discuss the plan with the Board of Supervisors or discuss anything with staff. This is unsettling, to say the least. Worse yet, there is a second Fair Political Practices Commission investigation currently going on due to the 29 items on Form 700 Statement of Economic Interests that Sue left off of the original Form 700 that all candidates are required to fill out prior to being elected. Form 700 provides necessary information to the public about an official's personal financial interests to ensure that officials are

making decisions in the best interest of the public and not enhancing their personal finances. There is also the matter of trying to change over 77 deeds of trust with the Briggs Family Trust at the recorder's office right after the election in order to be able to vote on the courthouse rezoning.

Also in the works is the transferring of responsibility of the senior center and 56 acre campground facilities that are currently run by the county over to the city.

During the entire campaign for District V supervisor all of the candidates stressed the point of waiting and putting on hold the Meyers Area Plan until we got a new supervisor that could represent us properly as Ms. [Norma] Santiago was termed out. No one wanted to have the decision placed in the hands of Placerville without the residents' involvement. All of the candidates also stated they would be the voice of Meyers and represent us as a full time supervisor for District V. This came after many community volunteers have spent years trying to slow the fast-moving TRPA and El Dorado County train down so that the Meyers community has the chance – through a transparent, inclusive, and clear process – to help develop the plan for our own future that is based on the desires of area residents, not TRPA nor special land speculator's interests and certainly not to be left in the hands of Placerville.

No community members ever wanted to stop the Meyers plan, as we know we need to grow and enhance our community. We just wanted to be involved in the decisions. We had high hopes that our new supervisor could help ensure the kind of process our community deserves. Now, we have an appointed supervisor from another district who comes from downtown Placerville, not Meyers and is involved with an election and does not have time for us. With no participation in the Meyers plan and now soon to be no responsibility with other county items located in South Lake Tahoe, what exactly are we getting from our elected supervisor?

I realize there is more to a supervisor's position than just what we see here in South Lake Tahoe, but our main concern is with us and our lack of representation and decision-making at the county level with local concerns. I urge everyone to get both sides of the story on what is exactly happening with us and what we can do. There is currently a recall on Sue that is going on that was started with the recall of all the supervisors and I encourage that you go **online** and get the information on why and how this is happening. I also encourage you to contact Sue Novasel and get her side of what is happening, as well as an explanation as to why she failed to bring up all the conflicts of interest during the election. Ask specific questions and get specific answers about our lack of representation for Meyers. There is a lot of misinformation and false accusations being put out by representatives of the City Council about members of our community and guest columnists with the *Tribune* who are writing about the ramifications for those who get involved with the recall and they need to be put to rest.

Kenny Curtzwiler, Meyers

Opinion: E. Coli is your oldest friend

By Lisa Margonelli

It's hard to find a fan of E. coli—especially since last October, when 55 people in 11 states got sick after eating at Chipotle. But we can see a reflection of ourselves in these tiny sausage-shaped bacteria. Like us, E. coli is a tireless innovator—constantly refining more than 700 different

strains—though it lives in your intestines, instead of Silicon Valley.

While pathogenic E. coli can travel in many different foods—hamburger, sprouts, spinach, romaine lettuce, rotisserie chicken salad, Lebanon bologna, raw cookie dough—"good" E. coli is one of your oldest, most intimate friends. This fine frenemy has allowed us to transcend the limits of our humanity, playing with genes, time, and evolution on an awesome scale.

Long before you drove a car or ordered a drink, you declared your independence by embracing E. coli. Just a few hours after you were separated from your mother, this strain of bacteria swam into your intestines and set up housekeeping. While you slept, it triggered vital elements of your immune system, and prepared the environment for the arrival of other good bacteria. It also set about manufacturing vitamin K, and keeping harmful bacteria at bay.

You might think that E. coli exerts its will through big numbers, but that's not the case. It is much less than 1 percent of your gut's 9 trillion microbial cells. You have just a billion E. coli, each merely 1 micrometer wide and 2 micrometers long. (For comparison, a human hair is between 17 micrometers and 181 micrometers thick.) As for the toxic E. coli, it takes hardly any of those to make a person mortally ill. Ten will do do the trick. Ten! One of E. coli's recipes for success is reproducing really quickly, sometimes doubling population in 20 minutes.

Another of E. coli's tricks is sharing code—like open source software developers and DJs. E. coli has a fancy toolkit for acquiring and trading DNA, including viruses and pieces of circular DNA that, Frisbee-like, can transfer DNA from one bacterium to another.

When microbiologist Pina Fratamico joined the USDA in 1990 she

started researching a newly discovered E. coli strain that lived harmlessly in cows' intestines but caused terrible diarrhea and kidney failure in humans. O157:H7, as the strain is named, had picked up the code for the kidney toxin from a virus (aka bacteriophage) had the ability to invade bacteria. Meanwhile other pieces of DNA, a group of genetic recipes for increased virulence called "pathogenicity islands," had made their way into the cell. Rather than riding in on a virus, the problematic DNA was either inserted into the cell's chromosome or remained as DNA rings, and the codes (virulence genes) carried by this newly acquired DNA made the bacterium more dangerous.

In 1993, O157:H7 showed up in hamburger at Jack in the Box, sickening more than 600 people and killing four children. That outbreak caused the USDA to declare the O157:H7 an "adulterant" in beef, and processors and restaurants changed their practices.

As humans changed their behavior, E coli kept on switching DNA and evolving. In 2011, a batch of bean sprouts in Germany harbored a new strain of E. coli carrying a toxin and novel way to adhere to intestinal cells sickened 4,000, caused kidney failure in more than 800, and killed 53 people. That strain was resistant to antibiotics. In 2012, the USDA began testing beef trimmings for six new toxic strains in addition to O157:H7. Keeping a few steps ahead of her nemesis is Fratamico's job, so now she's looking into another type of E. coli that may spend time in poultry before causing urinary tract infections and pneumonia in humans. "E. coli are very intelligent about illness. They want to survive," says Fratamico. "We're always trying to find the emerging strains and develop methods to detect them, but they're smarter than we are."

E. coli's resourcefulness, and its willingness to dance with humans in laboratories have, ironically, given us the super-human power of recombinant DNA. The lab strain K-12 was

isolated from the stool of “a convalescing diphtheria patient” in Palo Alto in 1918. K-12 then went to Stanford and (along with three other strains) became the pet of labs around the world, leading to 11 Nobel prizes. More important, scientists learned to take advantage of those Frisbee-like plasmids to insert DNA that would trick E. coli into producing useful things, including insulin that diabetics can use.

Another scientist who has revealed the powers of E. coli is Richard E. Lenski of Michigan State University. On Feb. 24, 1988, Lenski thawed a frozen sample of E. coli from his lab’s freezer, and put 0.1 milliliter in each of 12 little flasks. Overnight, the E. coli in the flasks snarfed up all the glucose in their broth while producing seven generations of E. coli. The next day, Professor Lenski removed 0.1 milliliter again from each flask and put them in 12 clean flasks with more glucose broth. Unlike many wild strains of E. coli, the strain that Lenski studied didn’t have plasmids and phages that allow cells to exchange genes. So when he put them in their flasks it was as though he’d taken away all of their smartphones and GameBoys and other toys and left them in a bare room with only a gulp of sugary drink. Lenski hoped to see how they evolved using only random mutations and natural selection, not gene sharing. “Evolution is like a game that combines luck and skill and perhaps bacteria could teach me some new games,” he wrote. The experiment was supposed to last 2,000 generations or about a year.

But it still hasn’t stopped. Twenty-eight years and 64,000 generations later, the experiment is still going. It’s not just an evolutionary casino, though, it’s also a time machine because every 500 generations the lab froze a sample from each of the 12 vials. Lenski has always wondered what it would be like if he could bring a Neanderthal back to life and and have him try to play chess or football—these frozen samples are his tiny time travelers.

When the project started, Lenski thought that evolution would

go quickly at first, as the bacteria evolved to fit into their flask-niche environment, and then plateau. But what Lenski and his team found is that the bacteria kept evolving and improving with a curve describing their fitness trending ever upward. Evolution is a bottomless well of innovation.

And something else really interesting happened. E. coli normally lives on glucose. Every night, the growing population in the flask would gobble up all the glucose, oblivious to the fact that there happened to be another food in the broth called citrate. Lenski calls it a “lemony dessert,” and until 2003 the bacteria skipped dessert. And then in one of the 12 flasks, they had a mutation and those bacteria started sitting down to lemon merengue pie every night.

Lenski’s long-running experiment became a sort of petri dish for smart students with skills in mathematics, modeling, and genetics, drawn to his 12 flasks and thousands of frozen samples. One of them, Zachary Blount, realized that they could trace the lemony-simpatico mutation back through the frozen samples and re-evolve it. It was like they were playing Groundhog Day with the bacteria, giving the Bill Murray character chance after chance. And in the process they were able to run evolution backwards and forwards, trying to find its underlying physics.

The research is more than theoretical: the type of work that Lenski and his students and colleagues have done has helped the FBI identify genetic differences between strains after the 2001 anthrax attacks and is helping others learn how bacteria evolve in the lungs of people with cystic fibrosis.

As Lenski reflected on his years with the experiment, he said, “How exciting is life in one tiny glass flask!” That got him thinking about the teeming activity that takes place on Earth: If every human, and a lot of cows and pigs and so on, have a billion or so E. coli in our guts, then there are more than a hundred quintillion E. coli or more out there—all mutating and

evolving madly, full of potential.

Lisa Margonelli writes the Small Science column for Zócalo Public Square, where she is the science and humanities editor.

Opinion: Marjorie Springmeyer – one of a kind

Marjorie Springmeyer

By Kathryn Reed

MINDEN – I'm a firm believer people come into our lives for a reason – even if it is not immediately apparent why.

As a journalist I'm always meeting people. Some of those encounters are more profound than others and have a lasting impression. Such was the case with Marjorie Springmeyer.

What an incredible woman – and I only knew her for a fraction of the 93 years she was alive.

More than 125 people gathered Feb. 28 to remember Mrs. Springmeyer, who **died Jan. 28**.

She used to write me letters – longhand – talking about the city of South Lake Tahoe, her travels, life and a little about her family. We would converse by phone. When I saw it was her calling I would answer if I knew I had the next hour free to chat. She wasn't one who would easily get off the phone.

Mrs. Springmeyer had such wonderful stories to tell about what life was like in Tahoe before it became a tourist destination and overbuilt. Her travels made me want to pack my bags.

I miss our talks – I've missed them for quite a while. I always thought there might be one more.

Her anger, frustration and heartache toward and because of the city are legendary. During the video of her life headlines involving some of that strife were shown – proving the significance it held in her life. She and her brothers, Knox and Bill Johnson, donated land for a City Hall that never got built. Instead, it's where the police department and courthouse are in South Lake Tahoe.

Bill Johnson attended Saturday's service, noting how his sister helped raise him because their mother was busy after their father died. Bill was 3 months old at the time and Marjorie 9 years old.

"When I think of Marjorie she always had a good spirit," Mr. Johnson said.

He and others didn't gloss over the difficulties Mrs. Springmeyer had to endure in her life – spending more than two years in a hospital after a car wreck in high school that killed one person and that left her with lifelong mobility issues, having her three children and husband precede her in death, being bed ridden for the last several years of her life, and all the land issues at the lake.

She had told me the friends were going to see "Gone with the Wind" the night of the accident. It was mentioned at the

service this was her favorite movie. One has to wonder if it was just the most memorable.

Her brother and others also spoke of the goodness Mrs. Springmeyer brought to their lives and those around her.

Her long, flowing white hair and penchant to wear bright colored clothes were talked about. So was her love for travel, animals and helping others.

Three Washoe women spoke of Mrs. Springmeyer's love of the tribe and how they had adopted her as a Washoe sister.

One relative talked about her fondness for donkeys.

In 2005 she told me, "I have a burro permit (from South Lake Tahoe). I pay $30. I used to have them at the amusement park. I keep it because they would never let me have another license."

That is the spirit – some might call orneriness – which I admired about Mrs. Springmeyer. She was a fighter, a doer, a don't take no for an answer kind of woman. I respected her for all of those things.

The wind was a constant refrain during the service – her love for it. Now I will forever think of Mrs. Springmeyer when the wind blows and listen just a little harder to what it might be whispering or howling.

Opinion: Will online courses

make education a human right?

By Marianne Krasny and Bryce DuBois

Just the first word in the name—*massive* open online course—poses the question. Just how big can MOOCs be?

MOOCs combine filmed lectures, readings, course material, and online interactions among professors and students—with the goal of reducing costs and expanding access to higher learning. Many MOOCs today already are huge. Andrew Ng, co-founder of the MOOC platform Coursera, used to teach 400 students a year at Stanford, whereas more than 100,000 students registered for his first MOOC on machine learning. Ng calculated he would have had to teach at Stanford for 250 years to reach the same number of students.

But the promise of MOOCs is even bigger than that. Could online courses make real the idea that education is a fundamental human right, regardless of where you live? Ng's Coursera partner Daphne Koller has argued yes—that MOOCs can educate students all over the world, even identify the next Steve Jobs in a village in Africa.

Right now the overwhelming majority of MOOC students are Western, white, and well off. But experiments are emerging to change that. Take the Kepler experiment in Rwanda. Launched by the nonprofit Generation Rwanda in 2013, its goal is to use MOOCs to bring the best of online education to the brightest survivors of the 1994 genocide. Like a young Rwandan woman who lived in refugee camps until the age of 14, and was selected as part of the first group of Rwandans to test business MOOCs offered by the University of Edinburgh.

Generation Rwanda knew that MOOCs weren't accessible to students in Rwanda. The first cohort didn't know how to type on a computer and spoke limited English; they certainly didn't have the academic background to take college-level courses. So

Generation Rwanda lined up American expats in Kigali as mentors. While the program is still working out the kinks, it already can claim success: 49 of its first class of 50 students have graduated.

NGO-university partnerships like Kepler represent an agenda somewhere between educational access and international development. But what might we learn from Kepler about MOOCs and the right to an education in the U.S., where, similar to Rwanda, a persistent underclass lacks access to quality education that might lead not just to better lives for individuals, but to better lives for families and whole communities?

At Cornell University, we tried an experiment to answer questions about MOOCs' capacity to build stronger communities in America. We designed a MOOC that was different from the business, information technology, and engineering MOOCs that aim to lift up Rwandans and other poor students in developing countries. Our MOOC—Reclaiming Broken Places: Introduction to Civic Ecology—is an exploration of grassroots environmental stewardship. In particular, we want the students to explore why people spontaneously "reclaim" broken places—like vacant lots in Detroit where residents plant community gardens and street trees; beaches destroyed by Hurricane Sandy in New York, where volunteers rebuild sand dunes to protect their shoreline; or polluted streams in Washington, D.C., where young people remove trash. Because many people who reclaim broken places live in the communities where these places scar the landscape, we wanted to see how we could make our MOOC accessible to these same communities and their environmental stewards.

The participants in our experiment were not young people who might be the next Steve Jobs. Rather they were middle-aged African-American ladies in low-income housing in Anacostia (a Washington neighborhood), Latino elders in Providence, R.I., and immigrant and African-American community leaders in

Queens, N.Y. Following the Kepler model, we decided that in order to access the MOOC content, these individuals would need local mentors—people living in the communities we were targeting who could understand the lectures and readings. Then we set about answering the question: How do mentors shape access, learning, and local action when people in low-income communities participate in a MOOC?

Our students were not trying to earn a degree. They were what we call "free-choice learners"—people who choose what they want to learn—like visitors to zoos and museums, and adults taking a MOOC just because they're interested. And for the most part, after watching a couple of the video lectures, the students in our local groups chose not to follow the intended MOOC pathway. Instead of listening to the lectures and reading the materials, they preferred to hear their mentors explain the ideas about how people reclaim broken places because of their love for life and love for the places where they live, and about how planting gardens or trees can bring people and help bring back a sense of community. The students then discussed how the ideas applied to their own broken places—the neighborhoods where they lived. And they planned actions to reclaim the broken places in their own communities.

The mentors—Akiima Price and Xavier Brown in Washington, Bryce DuBois in Providence, and Anandi Premlall in Queens—added their own touch to the lessons. Premlall used a film about the destruction of an urban farm in South Los Angeles as a jumping-off point to debate struggles around urban open space. And Price invited her students to share stories about losing sons and nephews to gun violence, as a way to introduce the concept of broken places. By discussing the course content—or the content as interpreted by the local mentors—the students learned a few things about ecosystem services, environmental governance, and sense of place and sense of community. And they came to realize the larger meanings of—and how to get involved with—grassroots greening efforts.

One way to think about our experiment is that the MOOC acted as a community-organizing tool to help participants identify things they wanted to see changed in their neighborhoods. In Providence, the senior citizens who participated in our MOOC are now working to convince the housing authority to allow them to grow their own food in a housing project garden. In Anacostia, participants are beginning to cultivate planting boxes to memorialize loved ones killed by violence. And the group in Queens launched 103 seed bombs—a mixture of dirt, compost, and wildflower seeds—to reclaim vacant lots.

So what does our experiment—along with experiments in Rwanda and other developing countries—tell us about MOOCs?

Ng shared a vision for what MOOCs can do: "I want to live in a world where students no longer have to choose between paying for tuition and paying for groceries. I want to live in a world where a poor kid born in Africa has nearly equality of opportunity as a kid born in the wealthy suburbs in D.C." Such a world, however, requires more than MOOCs. Educational access in poor communities—whether in Rwanda or Rhode Island—requires mentors to guide students toward getting a business degree or taking action to reclaim their community. And mentors make MOOCs smaller—mentors will not reach 100,000 students. But mentors may also help make MOOCs larger—not just about educational access for individual students, but a tool for building stronger communities.

Marianne Krasny, director of Cornell University's Civic Ecology Lab, teaches the Reclaiming Broken Places MOOC and is a Public Voices Fellow; her most recent book (with Keith G. Tidball) is "Civic Ecology: Adaptation and Transformation from the Ground Up". Bryce DuBois, an extension associate with the Civic Ecology Lab, is researching the political ecology of Rockaway Beach after Hurricane Sandy as a doctoral candidate in environmental psychology at the Graduate Center at CUNY.

Opinion: No city immune from an identity crisis

By Joe Mathews

Can you imagine Southern California without Hollywood? Or the Bay Area without Silicon Valley?

No? History suggests that the identities of cities and regions are more fragile, and their central industries more perilous, than we care to admit. (Just ask Detroit autoworkers.)

Joe Mathews

So it's quite possible that Los Angeles' entertainment industry—struggling with shifting business models and technology that allow film production just about anywhere—could be much smaller in the near future. And Silicon Valley? Here's a nightmare scenario: What if the security state escalates its current war against Apple to the point that technology companies relocate headquarters to countries with laws that protect customers' privacy? Heck, they may be able to lower their taxes while they're at it.

These dark thoughts occurred to me while reading a smart new book about a different California place—Bakersfield—and its identity as a capital of country music.

“The Bakersfield Sound: How a Generation of Displaced Okies Revolutionized American Music”, by *Bakersfield Californian* editor Robert E. Price is an entertaining history, essential for fans of country and its greatest San Joaquin Valley musicians, Merle Haggard and the late Buck Owens. But the book also says something profound—and troubling—about how places come to be hotbeds of a particular enterprise, and how they can lose that identity.

Bakersfield became a country music capital through accident and intention. The accident was the Dust Bowl, which brought environmental refugees to Kern County in the 1930s and ’40s. The migrants were outsiders among Bakersfield’s elites, so they mixed with each other and other outsiders—creating music in the post-World War II years that was informed by what Price calls “a synergy of economic hardship, determination, kinship, and dumb luck.”

Location helped; Bakersfield is close enough to Los Angeles to benefit from its energy and musicians, but far enough away not to be infected by its glossiness. And technology played a role, too, with the invention of Clarence “Leo” Fender’s Telecaster, the guitar that produced the rough, uncultivated country that became known as the Bakersfield Sound.

The intention involved the creation of infrastructure to support a community and of musicians. In Bakersfield, that infrastructure consisted of the honky tonks, starting most crucially with Joe Limi and Frank Zabaleta’s north side place, the Blackboard, and growing to more than 20 clubs with live music by the 1960s. Bakersfield’s musicians had audiences and gigs to pay the bills.

But here’s where the story of the Bakersfield Sound becomes its own sad country song. Bakersfield has lost its status as a capital of country. Why? Cultural infrastructure didn’t develop as deeply in Bakersfield as in other places—like Nashville—where “saloons (or art galleries) beget restaurants,

which beget jobs, which beget hotels, which beget apartments and markets and home improvement stores."

Social change undermined the Bakersfield Sound, the longtime music engineer Jim Shaw has noted—particularly the rise of Mothers Against Drunk Driving, which made a night of drinking and driving between honky tonks a dicier proposition.

Another problem, paradoxically, was the success, and expansion, of the Bakersfield Sound, as other musicians borrowed it and made it their own. Price shows how "the Bakersfield Sound never really died… [A] big chunk of it up and moved to Texas," where you can still hear it on Austin's Sixth Street. And KWMR, a radio station in Marin County, of all places, keeps the sound alive with its program, "Bakersfield and Beyond."

Bakersfield still has a music scene, but it's harder to find. Buck Owens' Crystal Palace remains a vital venue for country; Trout's Nightclub is still around. I'm a big fan of Jerry's Pizza and Pub downtown, where owner Jerry Baranowski, a sharp-talking Polish immigrant, says he hosts two kinds of musicians: the very good and the very local.

Price identifies two lessons for communities: First, cities must develop strong identities. And second, they can never allow that development to stop, even after they've created a culture so central to their identities that it wouldn't seem to need nurturing.

"Every American city, whether it prides itself on its public sculptures or deep-dish pizza, on hot-air balloons or woolen jackets, on abundant trout streams or Greek architecture, needs to develop that identity, or if it has been allowed to escape, remember what it once was," Price writes, adding: "It's a conversation Bakersfield should have initiated decades ago."

It's an especially important conversation in

California—because we are so defined by industries that rely on ideas, stories, and art that can leave our state in the blink of an eye. The promise of our creative industries is also its peril. These days, you can write code, make movies, or hear the Bakersfield Sound just about anywhere.

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

Letter: Warning from LTUSD to parents

Publisher's note: ***The following letter has been sent to parents of Lake Tahoe Unified School District.***

Dear Parents:

We would like to make you aware of a situation that may concern you. We were recently notified of the federal court ruling ordering the California Department of Education in Sacramento to release student records to a nonprofit parent group in the Bay Area.

While LTUSD is not involved in this legal matter, we are always concerned about student privacy. Therefore, we are providing you information on how you can protect your student and possibly not have their information released by the state.

At your school site, we have a one page objection form for you to use if you object to the federal court order regarding your child. If you do not object to the release of this information, you need do nothing. We also have the form and additional information on our website at www.ltusd.org. The

specific information is located under the parent tab at the bottom entitled Morgan Hill vs. the California Department of Education.

While submitting a form will not guarantee your student's information will not be released, it is the only means for expressing an objection to the current order. The court also issued a Protective Order, which prohibits the plaintiff from disclosing any confidential information to anyone other than the parties, plaintiff's attorneys and/or consultants, and the court. Thus, in no event is the information permitted to be disclosed to the public generally or be used for any reason outside of this lawsuit, and all information must be returned to the CDE or destroyed at the conclusion of the lawsuit.

Note that the Lake Tahoe Unified School District is not a party to the litigation and is not required to disclose any student data. If you have any questions, please contact CDE directly at 916.319.0800.

Thank you,

Lake Tahoe Unified School District

Opinion: Lead not an issue at STPUD

By Richard Solbrig

Due to the recent crisis of lead contamination in the drinking water in Flint, Mich., South Tahoe Public Utility District would like to provide information regarding water sampling procedures and the possibility of lead contamination in our

local distribution system. The district's priority is to provide reliable and safe water distribution to our customers efficiently and cost effectively. The district has been focused on safeguarding our resources for more than 65 years.

Following is an informational summary on how lead contamination occurs and what district procedures are in place to detect contamination.

How lead contamination occurs

Most lead contamination in drinking water occurs when lead leaches from pipes, fittings and solder joints as corrosive water (or water with a low pH level) moves through them. Homes built prior to 1987 may have used a 50-50 lead/zinc solder for indoor plumbing.

South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District's water distribution system

The district's main distribution system contains no lead pipes.

The district's service lines are primarily made of copper, poly ethylene, or iron pipe.

All plumbing fixtures manufactured after 2008 are required to be lead free (faucets, valves, fittings).

South Lake Tahoe Public Utility District's sampling procedures

The district samples all potable water source wells annually for several types of contaminates. All wells have tested at the non-detect level for lead.

The district samples 90-95 private homes built before 1987 for lead-copper every three years. These tests have resulted in non-detect samples, less than 2.5 parts per billion (ppb). All sampling is done in accordance with the EPA Lead and Copper Rule.

The district is currently in a reduced monitoring schedule for lead due to the fact we are well below the EPA’s action limits (15 ppb).

For more information regarding sampling, refer to the district’s annual Consumer Confidence Report **online** or through the Customer Service Department. This report lists all contaminates tested for in all source waters for the district.

Richard Solbrig is general manager of South Tahoe Public Utility District.