

WHY CIT

by John J. Kirlin, Ph.D.

“Why cities?” is the question implicit in debates about home rule. If the city form of government is valued, then the discussion of home rule and other devices to ensure competent and durable cities is critical. If the city form of government is viewed as irrelevant, unneeded or even harmful and wasteful, one is unlikely to be an advocate of home rule.

The value and importance of cities is usually apparent to California city officials and employees. Not all Californians appear to share these beliefs. Fiscal limits are popular among voters. The behaviors of city officials are constrained by disclosure, notice and public participation requirements reflective of suspicions. The California Constitution Revision Commission encountered great difficulty when addressing how to provide stable and secure revenues for local governments.

The Fiscal Picture

City officials often must feel that they are subject to ever-tightening fiscal constraints. Propositions 9, 13, 98 and 218 limited their fiscal powers. If there had been any doubt, the property-tax shifts by the state in 1992-93 and 1993-94 demonstrated conclusively that the governor and legislature consider local property taxes to be theirs for the taking. A single comparison to cities nationally illustrates the different context of California cities: nationwide, cities received 53 percent of their total revenues from the property tax in 1991-92, while in California property taxes represented only 8 percent of total revenues in 1992-93. In that year, property taxes represented 10 percent of the total revenues for Berkeley, 5 percent for Emeryville, 9 percent for Davis, 12 percent for Sacramento and 13 percent for Rocklin. Cities

in California must piece together revenues from more sources than in other states, expending more political and administrative effort, which results in a more volatile revenue system.

More Than A Retail Relationship

While the fiscal dimensions of cities are easiest to demonstrate, the important challenges to cities are not solely fiscal. Revenues received by cities are not likely to greatly increase — one reason why it is important not to focus too much on fiscal chimera as a solution for whatever ails cities. More is at stake than simply revenues. The effectiveness of cities in completing whatever tasks they undertake and improving the working conditions of city officials and employees relies at least as much on nonfiscal support of city residents as on revenues, for example.

So long as the primary terms of reference between citizen and city are fiscal, the relationship remains no different from that between the consumer and the retail store. “I, citizen, provided \$500 in revenues. What did I get for those payments?” Cities are certainly more than Wal-Marts, or even Nordstroms.

Why Bigger Is Not Better

Clarifying “why cities?” is the first step in establishing more useful and rewarding relationships between cities and citizens. Why not just one government for the whole nation? For California? Or at least, just a single government for each county-sized area?

The answer is this: bigger government is not better, for at least three reasons related to the characteristics of cities: distinctive

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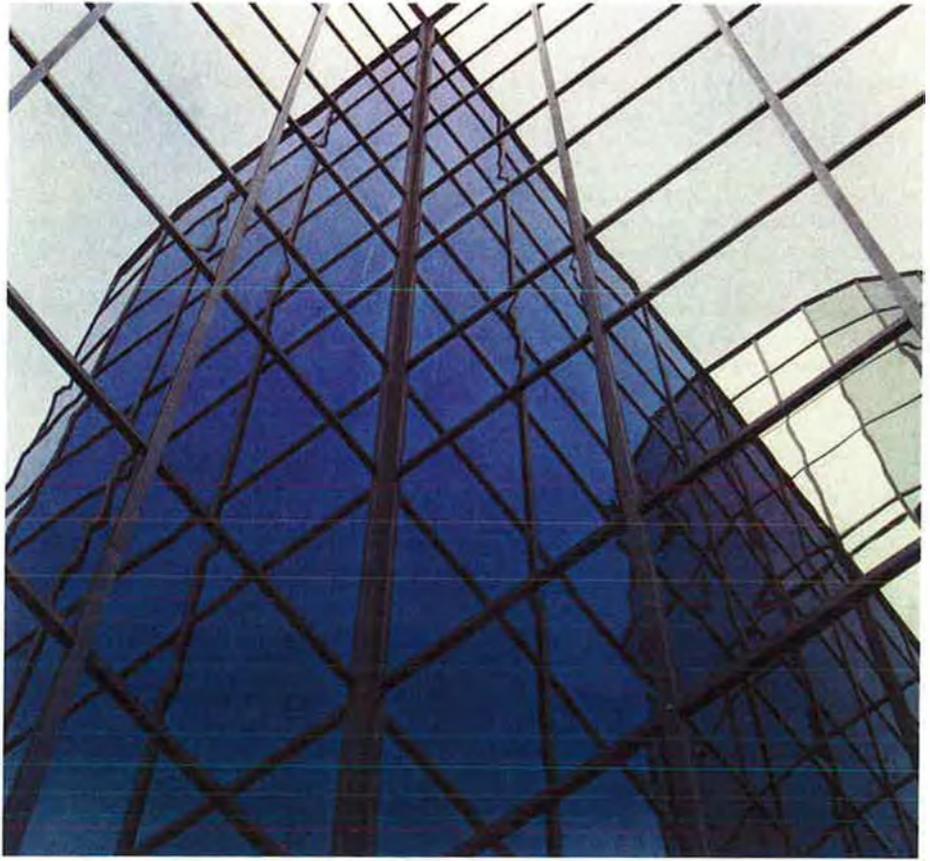
service capabilities; joining local and larger competencies; and collective action at human scale.

Distinctive Service Capacities

Cities provide services that are important to citizens: local police, fire, land-use planning, building-code enforcement, local streets and parks and recreation are common examples. Cities in California expended approximately \$24.8 billion in 1992-93, most of which can be attributed to providing such services. Of that total, approximately \$6.3 billion was spent on public safety, \$3.6 billion on transportation, and \$2.1 billion on cultural and leisure activities.

Moreover, the best available evidence shows that cities of modest size, certainly those with less than 100,000 population, are the most cost-effective providers of these services. One claim for cities is that they provide needed services at less cost than larger governments would incur. This is still an argument made on the basis of values directly tied to units of service provided and thereby weaker than ultimately needed.

An additional danger in this orientation to what cities do is potential inflexibility in defense of current programs or current employees. Cities have wide flexibility in service responsibilities undertaken and in how services are provided. Service responsibilities may be shifted to another jurisdiction, services may be provided under contract by private firms or other choices made. Similarly, cities have wide discretion in the numbers and assignments of personnel employed, consistent with collective bargaining or other legal constraints. As current employees and beneficiaries of services are very visible evidence of city activities and active participants in discussions of city choices, the potential danger of delaying changes too long is constant. Cities do not exist to provide employment to any current set of employees nor to provide any current set of services.



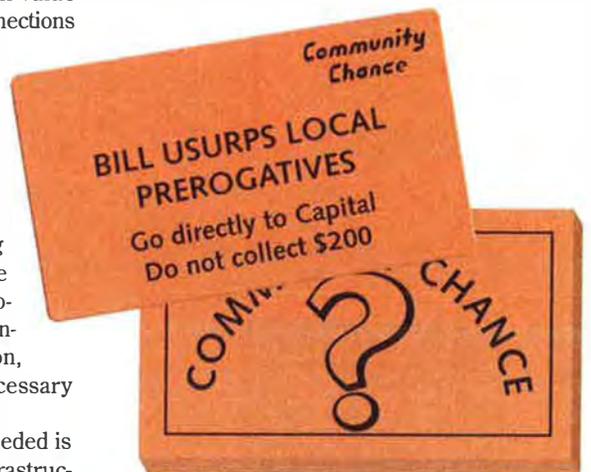
Joining Local And Larger Competencies

A more subtle answer is that cities are a critical element of important systems without which modern life would be extremely difficult. Neither the interstate highway nor the state highway systems are of much value without local roads to complete connections to residences and businesses.

Similarly, provision of water or disposal of wastes requires the actions of cities for most residents of California. Environmental protection increasingly requires supportive land-use practices — reducing non-point-source run-off and reducing vehicle trips generating emissions are two examples. Similarly, species-protection policies are shifting from individual species to habitat protection, where city land-use powers are necessary components of emerging policies.

In each of these cases, what is needed is effective use of land-use tools and infrastructure provision within the powers and competencies of cities but this is very difficult to undertake sensibly without nuanced information about site-specific conditions. Could the United States Environmental Protection Agency, the California EPA, or the South

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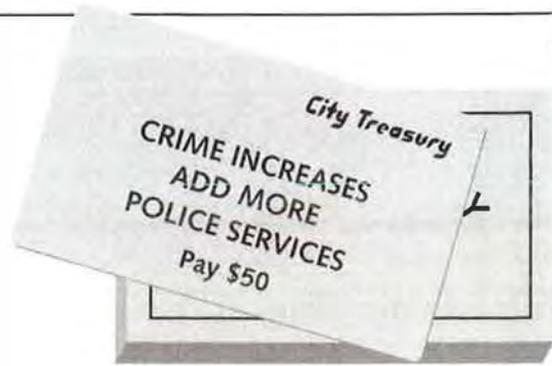




Coast Air Quality Management District individually make and implement an effective decision regarding land uses at the corner of Pico and Westwood Boulevards in the City of Los Angeles? No. Each lacks the legal authority to adequately consider competing values, the information needed for decisions and the tools needed to implement land-use decisions.

In this area, the rationale for cities begins to shift from the simple exchange of services for dollars to two more important issues. The

first is provision of "local" infrastructure that has value not only within city boundaries, but beyond. The second is *political* capacity to resolve competing values of relevance outside the city as well as within its boundaries. What joins the two issues is use of city government to reconcile, accommodate or mediate actions that have relevance both within and outside city boundaries. Transportation systems and environmental policies are two areas where this necessity arises constantly.



Collective Action at Human Scale

Most importantly, cities are instruments of collective action critically important to residents of specific, modest-sized geographical areas. Cities make land-use decisions, invest in infrastructure, structure their finances and undertake service delivery to address current problems and to achieve a desired future.

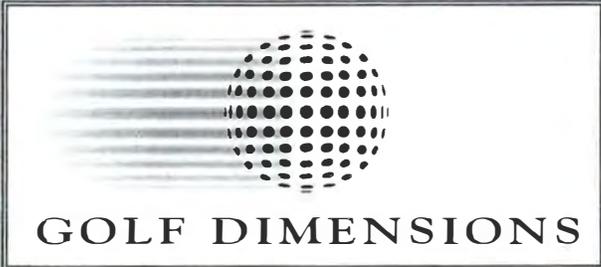
These choices vary widely among cities, reflecting desires of citizens as expressed by city councils. Fontana and Emeryville may wrestle with remaking formerly industrial areas. Roseville, Moreno Valley and Merced may confront growth pressures of the urbanizing fringe. Santa Monica and Berkeley may debate choices affecting housing stock and homeless populations.

The choices made also reflect the opportunities and constraints available at a specific time. When Fairfield sought commercial land uses at the end of the 1970s, the marketable choice was a regional shopping mall. When nearby Vacaville had the same objective ten years later, the marketable choice was for retail outlets. Both are successful, because they matched time and context. Cities are devices of economic growth.

In short, city governments are devices through which business interests, land owners and citizens seek to shape their economic futures. Other local governments also are relevant to these efforts, but many of them are directly creatures of cities (redevelopment, created by cities (e.g., Meilo-Roos districts or joint powers authorities) or created with support of cities (e.g., county-level transportation authorities). In the absence of cities, these decisions would be made at much higher levels of government, almost certainly with less input from local interests, both economic and noneconomic.

These decisions are not only directly focused on economic growth, but equally importantly on quality of life, including environmental factors and esthetic values. For example, the City of Sacramento's choice to support trees and landscaping by generous policies regarding pick-up of green wastes and flat-rate pricing of water reflect the community's quality of life and esthetic values.

While they are citizens of the nation and state, all Californians live in specific geograph-



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ically delimited neighborhoods and similarly most work in specific locations. Cities offer an opportunity to participate effectively in the shaping of these important locales, not only in regard to physical land uses, but also in preservation and enhancement of important attributes of quality of life and in the establishment of norms of civic interaction. Cities do not have free rein in making these choices, of course. They are constrained by geography, fiscal resources, economic context and national and state laws. In the absence of cities, how would citizens influence these important dimensions of their lives?

The Importance of Scale

Scale matters. No president, no governor, no national or state legislature is an effective device to address neighborhood-scale issues. For citizens, the costs of seeking action at the national or state scale are prohibitive. For policy makers at these levels, paying sufficient attention to multitudinous locales is impossible. Even larger cities such as Sacramento are recognizing that they need to provide opportunities for governance below the city level.

What Cities Do

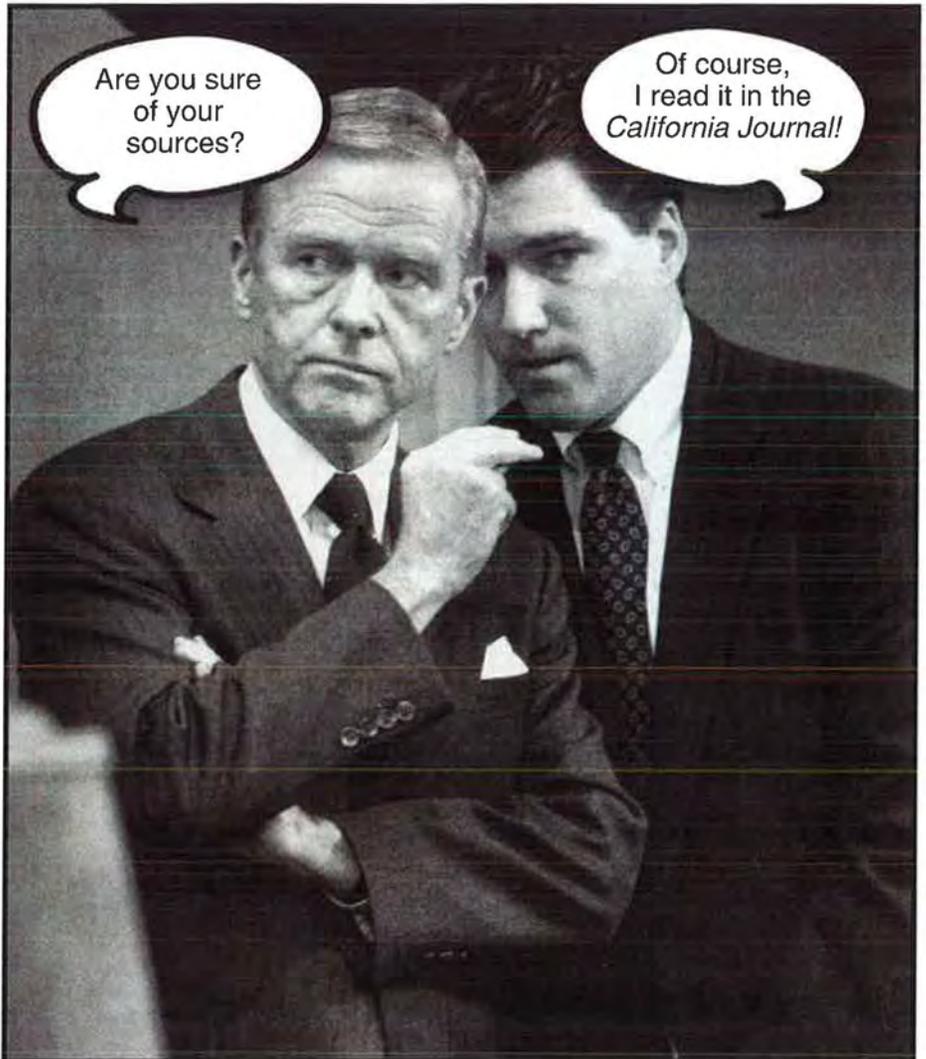
A short-hand statement of what city governments do is "to create valuable dirt." The value is created in various ways, but always bounded geographically. In services, value is found in the physical security provided by a local police force. In linkages to complex external systems, value is found in local streets and roads. In economic competitiveness, value is found in efforts to shape growth at the urban fringe and redevelopment in areas where manufacturing has declined. In quality of life, value is found in the decision by the cities of Vacaville and Dixon to purchase land along Interstate 80, preserving it in agricultural and other greenbelt uses. These and innumerable other examples are evidence of the important contributions cities make to Californians' lives.

Cities As Instruments of Collective Visions

Most importantly, however, cities are instruments for expression of collective visions for the future. Humans aspire to improved

futures for themselves, their children and others. Individual actions contribute mightily to achieving the future and all governments, including cities, must recognize the limits on their roles. However, collective actions contribute critically to our futures and those contributions must not be so diminished in political discourse that they are devalued or found wanting.

Cities are this society's best answer for how those aspirations can be pursued jointly at a small scale. How to jointly achieve a desired future is the dialogue cities must have with their citizens, and the role they must claim in society against those who would weaken cities.



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