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## **Editorial: Unincorporated blues**

### **Urbanized county needs to become a city**

**Bee Editorial Staff - (*Published March 12, 2003*)**

Time is not on Sacramento County's side. Half-city and half-county, the region's biggest local government is suffering what Supervisor Roger Niello aptly calls "the slow bleed." It needs radical surgery before it succumbs to fiscal anemia. Who will be the doctors?

The source of the county's woes is its peculiar role as the quasi-city government for Sacramento's huge urbanized but unincorporated population.

The residents of the Uncity of Sacramento, the half-million people who live in neighborhoods such as Antelope, Arden Arcade, Florin, Fair Oaks and Orangevale, depend on the county for services normally provided by cities: police, planning, roads. But the Uncity revenue base, straitjacketed by Proposition 13 and dependent on slow-growing sales taxes, is no longer up to the task of supporting those services.

Geoff Davey, the county's chief financial officer, projects a large and growing gap in the Uncity's municipal budget. That gap can only be closed by cutting back on police protection in Uncity or siphoning money from countywide services such as the jail, the district attorney, public health and child abuse protection.

Once upon a time, the county could dream about growing out of its budget problems. No more. The incorporations of Elk Grove and Rancho Cordova have taken away prime growth areas. The remaining Uncity comprises mostly older neighborhoods and retail districts having a hard time competing with big box stores, malls and auto dealerships in the new suburbs.

That leaves Sacramento County only one practical alternative: Get out of the city business. The half-million people of Uncity need to get city services from a city government, which receives more money under state funding formulas. The choice, both for the county and for Uncity, is either to incorporate or waste away.

The county's management last month offered the Board of Supervisors two options for getting out of the city business.

One would be to incorporate Uncity as its own city. The other would be to divvy up Uncity and annex its neighborhoods to Sacramento, Folsom, Citrus Heights, Elk Grove and Rancho Cordova. Either option would protect services in Uncity neighborhoods and give residents more local

control than they now enjoy.

Each presents daunting problems, however, beginning with politics. Different neighborhoods of Uncity may share a supervisorial district and a dreary fiscal destiny, but they don't yet share a common sense of destiny. Orangevale doesn't want to join Folsom or Citrus Heights, but has no impulse to form tighter bonds with Antelope and the Vineyard area.

Moreover, the supervisors are naturally averse to shrinking their jobs. Getting out of the city business would mean less power for the board, more for the neighborhoods. There would be no more endless meetings devoted to the placement of stop signs and the other trivia the current supervisors like to dwell on.

But continuing the status quo isn't an option. Unless Uncity's fiscal crisis is reversed, the quality of life in the whole county is in danger. The supervisors can't temporize or fiddle with halfway measures. One way or another, urban unincorporated Sacramento needs to become city territory, and the Board of Supervisors must lead the charge.

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