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Another Voice

There's not enough water for business as usual

Michael Ziser

Surveying their prospects in the 21st century, planners, businesspeople and residents in the Sacramento region have ample reason for both hope and despair.

The good news is that we have vibrant cities, an attractive business climate, and plenty of land already set aside to accommodate the economic growth many forecasters predict.

The bad news is that this opportunity for lasting prosperity is imperiled by the persistence of outmoded patterns of development that waste the natural resources — air, land and water — upon which our economic health and quality of life depend.

There are many examples of such waste — big road projects that clog up (and smog up) long before they are paid off; low-density housing developments that devour the land supply while driving down property values and saddling taxpayers with unnecessarily large infrastructure costs; leapfrog commercial building that leaves hundreds of hard-to-develop vacant lots scattered around the region.

But judging from recent events, it looks like the one we will have to deal with first is the problem of water.

Water strain: Historically, Sacramento's copious water supply has been the envy of California's thirsty desert cities. There has been plenty, even in dry years, for lawns and crops and salmon.

All that, however, is about to change. As new suburbs like the massive Sunrise-Douglas development spring up in places with no surface water rights and very little potable groundwater, they are putting previously unknown strains on our water supply.

Grand schemes like the Sacramento County Water Agency's Zone 40 Master Plan — which scoops out 30,000 extra acre-feet of river water here, pumps 40,000 acre-feet from the ground there, and squeezes

the rest out of existing clients — propose to rob Peter to pay Paul. They serve new developments by putting present water users — river systems, aquifers, farms, suburbanites and salmon — in real jeopardy.

While there are some developers and business owners who will benefit in the short run from the construction of new houses, everyone else — businesspeople, workers and residents — will suffer the effect of higher utility fees, unstable water supplies, aquifer contamination and an overall erosion of the standard of living.

As always, we will all be taxed for the privilege of subsidizing this unsustainable and destabilizing growth.

And that is the best-case scenario.

In the worst-case scenario, our region will lose some of its natural resources without even the temporary economic benefit of construction jobs. It is very likely, for example, that the water that currently flows to rice fields in the Natomas Basin will soon be sold down the aqueduct to Los Angeles' Metropolitan Water District. With it will go untold numbers of farm-related industries and jobs that have been a mainstay of the regional economy, leaving us with one fewer industrial leg to stand on.

At the same time we are losing sector diversification, we will be losing the open space and habitat values that have helped give Sacramento its reputation as an attractive community in which to live, raise a family and start a business.

In case anyone was still wondering, this is the way to San Jose.

Time to choose: There was a time in Sacramento when new water demands could easily be accommodated without damaging existing users and the environment, but that time is past.

We face a choice: We can continue to let a small minority exploit our resources for a quick buck, undermining the basis of our greater prosperity, or we can husband and protect our resources and take a long-term view of our region's environmental and economic health.

If we do the latter, we can look forward to steady and real improvement in our quality of life.

But if we acquiesce in the reckless misuse of our air, land and water, we will have nobody to blame but ourselves when the economic wells run dry.

Michael Ziser is an advocate for Habitat 2020, which describes itself as a joint committee formed by six local environmental groups to coordinate and promote sound environmental policy in Sacramento County. He grew up in Elk Grove and lives in Davis.

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