

Insight

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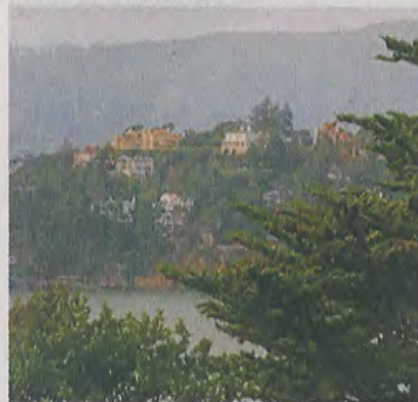


Urban blend

To cope with California's fiscal crisis, should cities consider sharing, merging or even disincorporating? **Page E6**

FROM THE COVER

CALIFORNIA'S FISCAL CRISIS

City mergers:
Mixing it up**Belvedere**

Bay Area cities that could merge — and what they could become:

Fremont

Population: 206,241
Area: 92 square miles

Union City

Population: 67,207
Area: 19.3 square miles

Newark

Population: 42,215
Area: 14 square miles

▶ **Fremont City**

Population: 315,663
Area: 125.3 square miles

Tiburon

Population: 8,666
Area: 13.2 square miles

Belvedere

Population: 2,125
Area: 2.4 square miles

▶ **Tiburdere**

Population: 10,791
Area: 15.6 square miles

San Carlos

Population: 27,718
Area: 5.92 square miles

Belmont

Population: 24,984
Area: 4.5 square miles

▶ **BelCarlos**

Population: 52,702
Area: 10.42 square miles

Sharing services makes sense in an era of deep city deficits

By Paul Saffo

Small-town living has long been part of the American dream, but amid California's fiscal crisis, it is becoming a nightmare. Cities like Vallejo have declared bankruptcy as municipal deficits deepen. Others, like Maywood in Southern California, have fired their city employees and outsourced everything from police and fire protection to pothole filling.

Cities all over the state are contemplating similar measures, but the Bay Area is particularly at risk of further municipal bankruptcies. Quite simply, the Bay Area has too many cities, and if serious steps aren't taken to consider all options — from sharing services, to merging municipalities and even disincorporation — the list of bankruptcies is certain to grow.

The nine counties of the Bay Area are home to 6.9 million residents, living in 101 cities. By contrast, Los Angeles County has nearly 10 million residents living in 88 cities, while Orange County's 34 cities represent 3 million residents. Over a third of Bay Area cities have populations of less than 20,000 residents, and nearly a quarter are smaller than 10,000 citizens. Among these are more than a few micro-cities like Belvedere, with just over 2,000 residents, and tiny Colma, whose population of just over 1,000 citizens is outnumbered 10-to-1 by a silent majority interred in the town's cemeteries.

Too many cities means wasteful duplication of services. Many Bay Area cities already share or outsource fire protection and are moving to share other services such as police and maintenance, but this still leaves plenty of pointless duplication. A hundred and one cities inevitably means too many mayors, city councils, city managers, administrators, town halls, maintenance yards and all the other costly trappings that make a city a city.

Too many cities also translate into more than just waste. City revenues are for the most part spent within city limits, and thus a proliferation of small cities translates into greater regional inequities when it comes to funding for schools and other services.

The result is an uneven landscape of municipal haves and have-nots, of well-off cities like Palo Alto and Menlo Park abutting a struggling East Palo Alto. Altruistic generosity is out of the question, but increased intercity service sharing could create a win-win situation where all cities involved realize cost sav-

ings and enhanced citizen benefits.

The current financial crisis thus has a silver lining: It is an opportunity to craft solutions that benefit the Bay Area as a whole.

The inefficiencies bedeviling Bay Area cities have been present for decades but ignored while cities were flush with revenue. Faced with historic budget deficits, our cities can't simply cost-cut their way out of this mess. We need new, creative solutions that rethink what a city is and how it serves its residents.

Boundary drops and shared services are a start. Fire services across the Bay Area have supported the idea of consolidation for years, but we need to think bigger. The Los Angeles County Fire Department serves 4 million residents in 58 cities and unincorporated areas. Why doesn't each of our Bay Area counties have a single fire department, or better, why isn't there a single Bay Area-wide fire department? The savings realized from consolidation could be spent on shared resources unaffordable to individual departments. For example, Los Angeles County Fire operates a fleet of nine life-and-property-saving multipurpose helicopters; the Bay Area has none. Such a fleet would be a godsend during fire season and when the Big One hits.

But fire is just a start. San Carlos is disbanding its police department and will rely instead on the San Mateo County sheriff's office for law enforcement. San Mateo is the second-smallest county in California; does each of its 20 HO-scale cities really need a police force?

If cities can share cops and firefighters, then surely they can also share just about

any service a city provides. Our counties all have fine infrastructures, from road maintenance to legal services. If done with vision, outsourcing services to the county level can deliver real benefits at lower cost across the entire spectrum of governmental functions.

Municipal-service sharing is not just inevitable; it is also the path to a larger and equally inevitable result. One way or another, the Bay Area has fewer cities in its future. Gus Morrison, the former mayor of Fremont, is promoting the idea of merging Fremont, Newark and Union City in Alameda County to share services and costs. Half Moon Bay is already considering the once-unthinkable option of disincorporation, but our cities also need to begin serious consideration of merging with their neighbors. On the Peninsula, for example, Portola Valley should merge with Woodside, Hillsborough should join forces with Burlingame, and San Carlos really wants to be part of Belmont.

The obstacles to such unions seem insurmountable, but service sharing paves the way to this end by creating the habit of cooperation. As cities share more and more, they will rapidly reach a point where merger seems inevitable and obvious in its benefits. Eventually many of our cities will merge, and the toughest issue they will face in doing so will be one of merely trying to agree on what to call their newly conjoined municipality.

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