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Dan Walters: Cityhood campaign a symptom

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California is one of the nation's most urbanized states, although with its sprawling residential subdivisions and vast tracts of virtually unpopulated land, its population density is not especially high -- just a fifth of New Jersey, the densest state.

At last count, nearly 31 million of California's 37 million-plus people lived in incorporated cities, which have evolved into the state's most dynamic public institutions. State government is tied up in political and bureaucratic knots, rarely capable of responding to California's growth and socioeconomic evolution, while the state's 58 counties are hobbled by their antiquated structures and bifurcated roles as units of local government and agents of the state.

California's last county was formed in 1907, but two-thirds of the state's 478 cities have incorporated since then and cities are constantly expanding. Proposition 13, the landmark property tax limit passed by voters in 1978, removed one of the political barriers to incorporation and annexation by eliminating the extra layer of taxation that cities had previously imposed.

Since 1978, 59 new California cities have been incorporated, and they and their older brethren have completely overhauled the structure of municipal finance, shifting from reliance on property taxes to generating local sales taxes, often using -- and perhaps misusing -- redevelopment to subsidize sales-tax-producing auto malls, big-box retailers and shopping centers.

Cityhood fervor has been especially evident in Sacramento County, home of three of the new cities created since 1978 and facing another incorporation campaign in an older suburb called Arden Arcade, just east of the city of Sacramento.

Sacramento County's flurry of incorporations reflects its unique development pattern after World War II, when -- thanks to shortsighted decisions by local civic leaders -- large residential subdivisions and major commercial areas evolved into unincorporated suburbs, served with a pastiche of municipal services by county government and a welter of single-purpose districts.

One by one, these unincorporated communities in what The Sacramento Bee has dubbed the "uncity" have become frustrated with the lack of local control and cityhood movements have been mounted. And each has drawn a hostile reaction from the county, which saw its tax base being eroded -- especially its sales tax base -- without a commensurate savings in overhead. Its immense county Sheriff's Department staved off reductions by signing contracts with the new cities, but one by one those contracts are vanishing as well.

The proposed Arden Arcade incorporation, for which petitions have been filed, would be especially damaging to the county's sales tax flow because it would include dozens of automobile dealers along Fulton Avenue.

Arden Arcade has almost no civic identity, being nothing more than a random collection of residential neighborhoods with widely disparate levels of affluence, interspersed by commercial strips. If its residents yearn for city services, annexation to the adjacent city of Sacramento would make more sense, but that would be a very hard political sell. (In the interest of full disclosure, I live in the proposed city of Arden Arcade.)

Whatever the outcome of this latest incorporation drive, it's additional evidence that California's

governmental structure, both state and local, is hopelessly out of date and in critical need of modernization.

Simply continuing to expand cities without dealing with counties will backfire in the long run. A strong case could be made for eliminating urban counties and merging them with cities into larger regional governments -- super-cities, in effect. Without some kind of reform, however, we will see even more balkanization.

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