

Shelters filled with victims of endless ballot initiatives

California dreamin' gives way to harsh realities of urban decay, homelessness

BY DON CAYO, VANCOUVER SUN APRIL 1, 2013

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For Danny Chaconas, the heady promises of California dreamin' never quite became the reality that the Mamas and Papas used to sing about in the '60s and that he once imagined was his destiny in America's Golden State.

Chaconas, who as a young man full of hopes and aspirations traded his East Coast home for the West, didn't ever find the high-paying job that he assumed would be waiting for him in the fabled "Land of Opportunity." Still, he was able to put his psychology degree to work with a series of jobs in the mental health field, and two years ago, at age 65, he retired with a \$1,500-a-month pension - enough to get by on, though just barely.

Life here turned out to be less than stellar, but not too bad. At least, not too bad until he hit a spot of trouble a few months after retirement. Then, for Chaconas, as for many many thousands like him, the California dream began to morph into a nightmare.

Because these days when people in this state stumble onto hard times, there is next to nothing in the way of public support to catch them, or even slow their descent.

Not only has welfare assistance dwindled to, in some cases, well under \$200 a month, but school budgets have also plunged by more than \$1,100 per pupil over a decade. Thousands of jobs on the public payroll have evaporated, and many of the people who used to hold them have - along with a lot of their neighbours in the up-and-down private sector - lost their homes. On some roads, maintenance has been deferred so long that they are washing away, sometimes an entire lane starting to slide into the ditch. Some recreation facilities are closed or half-closed. And on and on ...

What does this sad state of affairs have to do with a series on direct democracy?

The connection is that the plight of Chaconas and thousands like him illustrates why and how California - a state that has been teetering on the edge of bankruptcy with several of its cities already pushed over the edge - has come to represent the textbook example of what political jurisdictions should avoid when considering new ways to empower their citizens.

Voters in California are asked twice a year to pass judgment on almost every kind of issue you can imagine - sometimes a dozen or more questions on a single ballot. A high percentage of these initiatives pass, and then state and civic legislators are obligated to implement them, regardless of whether the initiatives are practical or not. Too frequently, the result ends up tying state or municipal legislators' hands in unexpected and unintended ways that can have, and often do have, a crippling impact on governance and government services.

Californians have been able to vote directly on policy from time to time for more than 100 years. But the state's modern version of direct democracy - and the problems it has brought - started with the notorious Proposition 13, passed in 1978 during the first term of Jerry Brown, who is now once again governor after winning a comeback election last fall.

Proposition 13 sought to limit property taxes, which were soaring in the red-hot real estate market of the day. And it did just that - but also, not incidentally, lopping city, county and school board revenues to a fraction of what they had been, preventing them from ever raising taxes sufficiently to meet growing needs, and forcing them to become evermore dependent on state grants.

More importantly, Proposition 13 was a game-changer that not only launched a firestorm of new initiatives, but also an industry to flog them. Companies sprang up to gather the needed signatures to get a proposition on the ballot - they sometimes get paid \$10 or more for each person they convince to

sign - and budgets to promote the views of one side or the other soared into the stratosphere.

Meanwhile, government budgets shrivelled for all manner of programs - including those that might have provided some kind of safety net for people like Chaconas.

The few revenue-raising measures to survive in recent decades tend to target mainly, or only, high incomes.

Thus, even though various needs increase when times get tough, government revenues are hit even harder than usual. So now, at a time when the economy is stumbling, too few people and companies are making big money and thus paying big tax tabs.

It is not just the economy and the dysfunctional state safety net that has Chaconas standing where a Vancouver Sun writer could find him - in the crowd of 30 or more hanging around outside the fence surrounding Sacramento's Union Gospel Mission and waiting, despite bad odds, for a chance at an overnight bed in the overcrowded facility.

Unlike many homeless here (as well as in Vancouver and many other cities in North America), he is neither addicted nor mentally ill nor unskilled. But, he ruefully admits, his own foolishness played a role in creating his plight.

Chaconas blames his downfall on "a woman who loved crystal meth more than she loved me," and who cleaned him out of money before kicking him out of the home they shared. Despite his pension income - much more than most homeless people have to draw on - he simply has not been able to accumulate enough to make the first rent payment so he can start again on his own.

Chaconas may be untypical in that he has more income than most who hang around outside the mission, but his lack of the usual physical or emotional baggage associated with homelessness is, sadly, becoming evermore common, says Joan Burke, a 25-year advocate for the poor who helps to run a substantial Catholic charity called Loaves and Fishes.

"What we're seeing now is a lot more families than when I first started," Burke said in an interview. "We're seeing a lot more people who can't find work - at least not enough work so they can afford a home - as opposed to those who can't work because of substance abuse or disability."

Credible numbers are hard to come by. The U.S. government does a homeless census every couple of years, Burke said, but it includes only those people who are actually seen on the street or in shelters on a given day, "so we know it's a massive under-count."

In 2010, the total for the city was, by this reckoning, 2,5002,600. That is about the same as an equally hard-to-verify number sometimes cited for Vancouver, although Sacramento is less than two-thirds as large.

What Burke sees as more telling - and more shocking - is the number of children that teachers identify as being homeless at some point during the school year in Sacramento County. This is a sprawling land mass that is bigger than Rhode Island and, although it has only two-thirds of Metro Vancouver's population, the number of homeless last year was reported at 11,000.

"This includes families staying in very cheap motels not meant for permanent occupancy, or tripled up with two other families but not on the lease," she said. "It doesn't mean they're physically outside, but it does mean they're in very unsettled situations."

These kinds of numbers are replicated all over the state, although the visible face of homelessness is, in some ways, getting hard to see.

Oprah Winfrey brought fame and shame to Sacramento four years ago with an expose on homelessness that featured a sprawling tent city on the banks of the American River a few minutes walk - a little longer if you're pushing a shopping cart - from Loaves and Fishes.

In response to the story, other reporters flocked to Sacramento from around the world. The authorities found the publicity embarrassing, Burke said, so the people occupying the highly visible tent city were dispersed.

"We still have as many homeless," she said. "But now the places they stay are hidden away in little pockets here and there."

GIVING VOICE TO MODERATION

"There are three problems with direct democracy in California," says Gordon Gibson, the former B.C. Liberal leader and current fellow at the Fraser Institute.

"No. 1, the bar to get a proposition onto the ballot is too low.

"No. 2, there are no cost controls on expenditures, so people with a lot of money can sway the public, particularly on complex questions.

"And three, there is no responsible way to vet questions before they go on the ballot."

Geoff Campbell, the son of former B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell and a political junkie and IT specialist who has lived and worked for a decade in Los Angeles, would add a fourth point: Voters make too many decisions based on too little information. So, just as Gibson was instrumental in designing B.C.'s first and only citizens' assembly to educate and inform voters on the complex issue of electoral reform, Campbell is doing likewise with a template that can be used for a host of issues. He hopes his idea will be adopted in California and some of the more than a dozen other "initiative states" where direct votes on policy are held regularly.

Only Campbell's version of a citizens' assembly, currently in beta testing, is entirely online. And it is much cheaper and far more nimble in the sense that it can deal with many more issues than the costly and cumbersome B.C. exercise.

The B.C. assembly consisted of 160 people, randomly selected but controlled to ensure the group was representative of the province's demography and geography. They met several times to be briefed by experts, and to discuss and ultimately recommend an electoral reform model that went to a province-wide referendum.

Campbell's model would recruit people he calls "citizen legislators" - folks who represent no special interests and want to serve as "the voice of the average informed voter" - to join an online panel for a year. They would commit to spending time each week to study select issues, with an obligation to listen to cases presented by both sides.

And then they would weigh in on initiative debates with considered opinions and recommendations that could be published and provide the basis for a broader and well-informed discussion.

This would provide a counterbalance to "a system that is set up to focus on the issues that make us different, not on the issues that make us similar."

In Oregon, Tyronne Reitman spearheads a group that has been sanctioned by the state legislature to implement an experiment in citizen engagement with a model that falls somewhere between Gibson's and Campbell's.

Like Campbell's, it is considerably cheaper and more streamlined. It has just 24 members - volunteers, screened to ensure they represent a good cross-section of the population, who serve for a year.

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