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## California Perspective Online: Timm Herdt -- How cities invited the death of redevelopment

By **Timm Herdt**  
Commentary

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Last fall, the League of California Cities, which spent \$2.5 million to promote a ballot initiative, argued forcefully that property taxes should be used only to pay for essential public services.

In their official ballot argument for Proposition 22, the head of the association's Fire Chiefs Department and the president of the California Police Chiefs Association wrote that property taxes should be used "to fund vital local services like 911 response, police and fire protection."

It's the same argument that Gov. Jerry Brown is using these days as he makes his case to disband the state's 400-plus local redevelopment agencies and to instead spend the property tax revenues they now receive on bread-and-butter services for California taxpayers.

"Redevelopment funds come directly from local property taxes that would otherwise pay for schools and core city and county services such as police and fire protection and care for the most vulnerable people in our society," Brown said in his State of the State address. "I come down on the side of those who believe that core functions of government must be funded first."

Brown and the League of California Cities are both right about how the spending of tax revenue should be prioritized. But they part ways over the question of whether using redevelopment money to spruce up city streets and offer tax subsidies to entice developers are core government functions.

The cities say yes; Brown

says no.

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It's approaching crunch time for legislators to decide which side they'll take in this dispute. Last week, both houses passed the initial versions of their budget bills. The Senate agreed to Brown's proposal. The Assembly assumed the \$1.7 billion in revenue, but kept open the option for a compromise that would produce the money without permanently disbanding redevelopment agencies.

Senate President Pro Tem Darrell Steinberg told me last week he is confident there are enough votes in the Senate to end redevelopment. The Assembly Budget Committee's document is clear about its intent: The money will be set aside for uses other than redevelopment, but it may yet be possible to "achieve the savings through reforms in lieu of elimination."

Still, the cities press their case -- and, for the most part, seem unwilling to discuss a compromise.

Last week the cities' association put out a press release citing the passage of Proposition 22 and asserting that by taking on redevelopment lawmakers are telling voters, "You don't count."

That argument might carry some weight, except for the fact that in promoting Proposition 22 last fall the cities were very careful not to mention the word "redevelopment," fully aware that there is no great outpouring of public affection for those programs.

In the 463 words of the cities' ballot argument in favor of Proposition 22, "911 service" is mentioned five times, "fire protection" four times, "police service" four times and "senior services" twice. "Redevelopment" -- which pays for none of those things -- was mentioned not at all.

Opponents did bring up redevelopment in their argument against Proposition 22, but the cities' 249-word rebuttal was, again, silent on that aspect of the measure.

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Proposition 22 passed convincingly, with 61 percent of the vote. But it seems clear that what voters wanted to protect were local funds that pay for actual services they care about. Such protection was in fact included in Proposition 22, which prohibited the Legislature from diverting the share of property taxes that helps fund general city government operations.

The redevelopment provision was an add-on -- one that few voters knew about and that the League of California Cities took pains not to publicly mention.

To argue that voters gave a mandate to protecting redevelopment is dishonest and silly.

Putting redevelopment into their initiative was an overreach on the cities' part, and one that now complicates any possible compromise that would allow redevelopment agencies to continue while also turning over a greater portion of their tax revenue to be spent on basic government services.

As Steinberg told me last week, legislators would like to preserve some of the economic-development and blight-revitalization functions of redevelopment, but Proposition 22 gives them no option other than to blow up the current system and build something new.

Basically, in response to lawmakers having decided in recent years to use a portion of redevelopment revenues to help pay for schools instead, city officials cooked up an initiative that told the state, "If you want to do that again, you'll have to do it over redevelopment's dead body."

One should always take care when issuing such ultimatums.

**Timm Herdt is a columnist for the Ventura County Star.**

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