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Common sense takes beating with redevelopment funding

By TOM BARNIDGE

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For anyone on the fence about Gov. Jerry Brown's proposal to eliminate redevelopment agencies, a story Monday should have helped decision-making.

In that story, Santa Clara Mayor Jamie Matthews lamented the possible loss of \$40 million in redevelopment funds his city promised the San Francisco 49ers for their stadium project.

The issue in a nutshell: If Brown gets his way, the \$40 million would be returned to the state's general fund, where it can be funneled to schools and local governments. If he does not, Santa Clara will give it to an NFL team that Forbes magazine says is valued at \$925 million and generates \$220 million in annual revenue.

Ah, yes, the age-old battle between common sense and "huh?"

This is not to condemn all redevelopment spending. It's dangerous to paint with a broad brush. However, logic seems to be on holiday here.

The reason these agencies were created more than 60 years ago -- they were meant to be temporary, by the way -- is to encourage development in blighted areas that commercial investors found lacking. By making infrastructure improvements -- streets, sewers, sidewalks -- redevelopment attracted new businesses, which generated new taxes, which were funneled back to redevelopment agencies, which repeated the process.

Somewhere along the line, though, the definition of "blighted" was fudged. (Walnut Creek, Danville and Lafayette have redevelopment agencies. Are any of those cities blighted?)

Through the years,

the criteria for spending has been liberalized, too. Santa Clara's \$40 million for a football stadium is not unique. The Los Angeles Community Redevelopment Agency has earmarked \$52 million for a parking garage for billionaire Eli Broad's new art museum in L.A. Civic Center.

If these are not outright abuses, they at least twist the system by its ears. In addition, a pile of money is at stake. Taxes returned to redevelopment agencies, which otherwise would go into the state's general fund, amount to about \$6 billion annually.

The issue is so vexing that it has brought together politicians from opposite sides of the aisle. Assemblyman Chris Norby, R-Fullerton, recently supported Brown, a Democrat.

He told the Orange County Register that redevelopment "was a temporary fix to a temporary problem. It was never intended to be a permanent drain on the budget."

Before we wrap this argument in a bow, though, let's hear from the other side. For that, we turn to Jim Kennedy, Contra Costa County's redevelopment director.

"The large majority of activities that redevelopment agencies undertake have nothing to do with the examples you cite," he said. "Most of it is the sort of gritty infrastructure that prepares areas for development and investment by the private sector."

He said dubious investments in projects such as stadiums are rare. More numerous are those such as Parkway Estates in North Richmond, where redevelopment led to the construction of privately owned homes in an area dominated by rentals, and where renovation of an abandoned plant kept Palecek home furnishings from relocating elsewhere and taking 300 jobs.

He also points to Contra Costa Centre Transit Village, which "has 7,000 employees, 6,000 residents and 6,000 daily BART patrons, and is a model of how redevelopment can be used to facilitate smart growth. It wouldn't have happened otherwise."

So maybe this is not a simple yea-or-nay issue. Maybe cutbacks and reforms can reinvent redevelopment. But there's no way California should give \$40 million to the 49ers.

Not until they get a quarterback, anyway.

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-- Tom Bamidge is a columnist for the Contra Costa Times, a MediaNews Group newspaper.

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