

Contra Costa Times editorial: Reform redevelopment system

Contra Costa Times editorial

Posted: 02/23/2011 03:30:00 PM PST

Updated: 02/23/2011 04:42:22 PM PST

THE LONGER Californians debate Gov. Jerry Brown's plan to phase out redevelopment agencies, the more city officials whine, the clearer it becomes: Redevelopment, as it is currently managed, is a luxury we cannot afford.

A good idea when first conceived more than half a century ago as a way to rebuild the most-blighted neighborhoods in the state, but far too often redevelopment has turned into an economic windfall for developers, sports franchises and city officials looking for ways to subsidize their budgets.

The money comes from property tax funds that would otherwise go to education, social services for the needy, service districts like fire protection and water delivery, and basic city police protection.

Instead of acknowledging these core services should come first in these tight times, city officials are rushing to lock in more money before Brown and the Legislature turn off the spigot. In Santa Clara, for example, city officials plan to spend \$40 million of redevelopment money for a new 49ers football stadium.

Think about it: Can we really afford to have government supplement a sport that is so financially lucrative? Something is very wrong with this picture.

Santa Clara is hardly alone. San Diego wants to spend hundreds of millions of redevelopment dollars to build a new stadium for the Chargers. Escondido wants to spend \$50 million on a minor league baseball park to lure away the Portland Beavers. And Oakland would like to use redevelopment money on a new stadium to keep the A's.

Speaking of Oakland, it turns out that the redevelopment agency pays the salaries of the equivalent of 171 full-time employees in 12 city departments. The Los Angeles Times reported this last week as it revealed legally questionable uses of redevelopment funds throughout the state.

The same paper reported last fall that about one-third of municipalities with active redevelopment agencies spent a combined \$700 million in housing funds from 2000 to 2008 without constructing a single new unit or rehabilitating existing units.

As we've seen in Hercules, millions of redevelopment dollars went to consultants who have almost no construction to show for it.

Yet, city and many county officials continue to scream, trying to protect their fiefdoms with no consideration of greater societal needs.

Credit Contra Costa County supervisors with recognizing the system desperately needs reform. And credit Supervisor John Gioia of Richmond for speaking out for the whole community rather than the interests of city officials.

Sure, there have been some good redevelopment projects. But we keep waiting for city officials to call off their public-relations blitz and offer some meaningful reforms to ensure the benefits are worth the costs.

###