



Photo courtesy of Gloria Duffy

The Art of the Possible

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President and C.E.O.

San Francisco's downtown is a jewel of our region, a magnet for tourists, conventions and those seeking good food and lively arts. Keeping this special place

clean and pleasant for locals and visitors is in the interest of our regional economy as well as good for our self-esteem.

Yet the streets of downtown San Francisco are often beset by the homeless and destitute, which creates problems for merchants, residents, workers and visitors. Wikipedia notes that "San Francisco is often considered the homelessness capital of the United States," with a homeless population of 7,000-10,000. The problem is not just that downtown can be difficult to navigate or unattractive. The homeless are among the most vulnerable people in our society, often suffering from mental illness or substance addiction, and it is incumbent on us to care effectively for our neediest citizens.

Prior to the November election, I attended a campaign fundraiser for Gavin Newsom, in his race to become lieutenant governor of California. In the backyard of a Los Altos home, one of the attendees asked Mayor Newsom what could be done about the problem of homelessness on the streets of San Francisco.

Newsom answered that there was one sure way to address the problem of homelessness. He said the presence of the multiple agencies serving the indigent is what draws them to the downtown area. If those offices – presumably including offices such as the California Department of Social Services, the San Francisco Family Service Agency and private non-profits providing social services – were not in central San Francisco, Newsom said, then those they serve would not congregate nearby.

This is logical, and if it is true, this may be another example of problems to which we know the solution, but can't seem to implement an obvious fix. So why don't we move social services out of downtown San Francisco? There would be concerns, of course, from other neighborhoods that would be unhappy about playing host to the homeless or others who use these services.

But perhaps there are places such as empty land outside the downtown area where the public functions of all the different social services could be set up in one location, including temporary shelter and food service. Another possibility would be some of the millions

of square feet of empty commercial office space that is now available throughout the Bay Area, some of it in industrial parks away from residential neighborhoods. Why couldn't San Francisco and private non-profits rent some of this space, or simply give building owners a tax deduction to use their facilities, and set up services for the homeless and needy population? A shuttle from downtown could even be provided for those who congregate on the streets, to where they can obtain the services they need.

This wouldn't address the problem that some of the indigent would still seek to be in the downtown center of San Francisco because of its panhandling opportunities. Mayor Newsom said at the Los Altos gathering that many of the panhandlers come from outside San Francisco and go back mainly to the East Bay at night. San Francisco's new "sit-lie" law will make panhandling in downtown more difficult by criminalizing the behavior associated with it. But if panhandlers are mainly coming from the East Bay, then a better strategy would be for San Francisco to work with East Bay cities on better care of the indigent in their own cities.

The point here is not that these may be exactly the right solutions to the problem of the safety and appeal of downtown San Francisco streets or caring for the homeless. But this is the type of thinking we need pursue. So often we know what would move us toward solution of a problem, but we just can't implement it. Old ways of thinking about problems, lack of vision, bureaucratic barriers, and lack of strong leadership impede the changes that would make an impact.

A mayoral election is coming up in San Francisco. Mayors with vision and strong and relentless leadership can change their cities for the better. One of my favorites was San José Mayor Tom McEnery. A strong personality with clear vision, in the 1980s he not only invigorated downtown San José, but with a key insight expanded the city limits to include the North San José area that is now home to such technology giants as Cisco Systems. This has expanded San José's tax base mightily.

One of the first things Tom McEnery did after being elected was strengthen the role of the mayor in San José, giving the mayor the power to take bolder steps to solve problems. He wrote about his strategies in a book, *The New City State*. San Francisco's next mayor needs to be strong and able to break through barriers to solve the city's thorniest problems. Ω

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