

Author Warns of Perils of 'Hyperdevelopment'

Strange as the science fiction visions of our impending future may be, equally strange are yesterday's scrapped fantasies of today. Filling in San Francisco Bay to create more real estate, crisscrossing the Bay with dikes to turn it into freshwater reservoirs, forging a bridge from Hunters Point to Alameda — these near-realities at once induce horror and yet, on second thought, retrospective gratitude that they've been relegated to the dustbin of history.

Mostly. According to Gray Brechin, a University of California, Berkeley visiting scholar and author who spoke of these narrowly averted "megafollies" in a lecture delivered to Alameda's Public Affairs Forum Saturday night, Sen. Dianne Feinstein and her developer-mogul husband are still itching for that trans-bay bridge — known as the Southern Crossing — to Alameda.

Brechin long-ago discovered plans for a number of radical Bay Area development projects as he was burrowing through the second-floor "ephemera" room of the now-defunct Holmes bookstore in Oakland.

"It would've made the Bay Area into another L.A.," he said as he unfolded old diagrams depicting large swathes of bay as in-filled land, with a narrow band of water in the middle reserved as a shipping channel. Other plans project dikes stretching across the Bay, blocking tides and creating several reservoirs. This latter project even received the backing of the San Francisco Chronicle when it was proposed.

As a geographer, Bay Area historian and former journalist, Brechin has detailed in great depth the often catastrophic consequences, environmental and otherwise, of the Bay Area's heady development over the past 150 years — development, he says, that has often been for the benefit of a small few.

But it's wealth made possible by often-unacknowledged taxpayer subsidies, Brechin said in a interview at his campus office last week. "We're paying the overhead for development."

Without those pipes and highways, housing subdivisions, retail centers and other urban developments would be dead in the water, he said. "These projects can't work without taxpayers investments. All cities are products of pipes, tubes and highways."

Developers' margins depend on these requisite civic investments. "The overhead must be borne by the public treasury," he said. Yet he worries that these necessary taxpayer subsidies are taken for granted by developers who don't give enough back to the community.

"The taxpayer should in return get something. The public should have a strong say in what gets built where," he said.

He points with palpable horror to the current transformation of California's Central Valley and the attendant congestion and pollution.

"Entire hilltops are being scraped off for housing developments," he lamented.

The Central Valley's days as the nation's breadbasket are numbered, Brechin believes, as agricultural land is increasingly displaced by suburban and exurban housing subdivisions.

"Cities will always get priority — agriculture and the environment will suffer," he said. Money often proves the deciding factor, with Central Valley housing profits trumping farming's comparatively meager returns — profits that developers in turn use to wield influence in local politics and civic planning.

If the situation is dire elsewhere, his prognostications for Alameda aren't any cheerier, given current forecasts of rising sea levels. "Alameda is going to have major flooding problems," he predicted. And Bay Farm? "Bay Farm is on geological Jell-O. I think the ocean will reclaim it."

Brechin, a longtime Berkeley resident, currently devotes his days to researching the transformative and lasting impacts New Deal Works Progress Administration (WPA) projects had on California infrastructure in less than 10 years.

"Virtually every park in San Francisco was created by the WPA," he said, in addition to scores of schools, bridges, levees, roads, sewers — the nuts and bolts of urban infrastructure. Some of Alameda's New Deal projects include the West End Library, the Park Street Bridge and Alameda Power & Telecom's Central Substation at Grand Street and Eagle Avenue.

He gazes admiringly at a poster with images of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt that hangs over his desk, taking solace in the ideals they embodied and the practical programs they effected for the broader social good.

A digression on Roosevelt inspires him to ask, "What could a very Enlightened and compassionate government do?"

Cynicism aside, it remains an open question.

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