

OPINION

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Editorials

S.J. should invest in city's history at San Pedro Square

Not long ago, a \$6 million investment in downtown buildings would have raised barely a blip in San Jose, where the redevelopment agency routinely helps pay for historic facades and seismic work. But combine the worst economy in decades, the most controversial downtown property owner and some sloppy work at City Hall in getting information to the public, and you've got a recipe for a pitched battle at Tuesday's City Council meeting.

The issue is the proposal to transform the mostly vacant northern end of San Pedro Square into a pedestrian-friendly public market — this time including a different mix of loans and grants from what the council originally discussed. The overriding question is philosophical, however: Should decisions to invest redevelopment money be based purely on a direct dollar payback to the city? Or should they take into account less tangible goals, such as creating public spaces, encouraging private investment and keeping the charm and atmosphere of those rare, older parts of downtown?

We take the broader view, so we continue to favor the San Pedro plan. It would build on the historic charm of the southern end of the square, which is mostly restaurants, and would weave in the Peralta Adobe and the Fallon House, bringing some life to the publicly owned historic sites that now are mostly a drain on the city.

Controversy was inevitable here because much of San Pedro Square is owned by the family of former Mayor Tom

McEnery, a political lightning rod. Opponents of the plan include labor leaders, never pals of McEnery, and some neighborhood activists concerned about spending. So when the council voted earlier this year to authorize negotiations, it also agreed to do a fiscal analysis of the project and schedule a study session before making a final decision.

This is where clouds intrude. The fiscal analysis was done a month ago, but the city didn't follow its usual practice of notifying interested parties, so most didn't find the report until late last week. And the study session hasn't happened. So no wonder the opponents were up in arms to see the item back on this week's council agenda for another vote.

Poor communication exacerbated the tensions — but there's time to recover. Tuesday's vote is not a final approval. Mayor Chuck Reed promised Friday that the council will conduct a study session when there's a firm proposal to debate. Other deals have been rejected at the last minute.

The San Pedro fiscal report shows a negligible direct return on the city's proposed investment, as low as \$40,000 a year. But much of the historic downtown has been revived with financing like this that didn't have to pass a direct payback test. The city recently spent some \$8 million on facade grants along Fountain Alley and on other historic buildings. It's a huge improvement, and nobody protested. But then, the McEnerys don't own Fountain Alley.

Cartoonist's view



DAVID HORSEY — SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

Readers' letters

Tax on plastic bags would be Pavlovian

Apparently the Santa Clara County Board of Supervisors prefers to consider taxing as means for behavior modification rather than allowing power of verbal persuasion to decrease use of plastic bags. It looks like the supervisors will be taking up the matter of charging 25 cents per plastic bag used when purchases are made. Pavlov's experiments with dogs used reward and punishment to modify behavioral responses. Now the Pavlovian conditioning process is being proposed to be used on consumers in Santa Clara County by punishing with a 25-cent tax per bag on shoppers who use plastic bags.

Mary Thompson
Campbell

Alum Rock deal smacks of cronyism

The Alum Rock School District's contract with its superintendent (Page 1B, Dec. 4) stipulated that Norma Martinez was to receive nothing if she resigned; her contract also stipulated that she was to receive 12 months' compensation if she were released without cause. She resigned after "negotiating" an 18-month compensation package with benefits, all before the new board of education members were sworn in — members, as I understand it, who may have held her "feet to an unpopular fire." This smacks of blatant cronyism. As a 28-year resident living within the Alum Rock School District boundaries, I wonder if the board will reimburse me for the tax dollars I have voted for and paid to support their efforts over the years.

Charles P. Perotti
Milpitas Unified School District
superintendent, retired

Electric-car plan way too hifalutin

Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla Motors, wants us to buy into his reasoning for why the feds should help fund his \$109,000

How to have your say

Letters of up to 125 words will be considered for publication. All letters must include a full name, address and daytime phone number, plus any affiliations that would place your opinion in context. The full letter policy, and additional letters, are available at mercurynews.com/opinion.

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electric sports car (Editorial, Dec. 4). He argues that in the tech industry, "early generations of any breakthrough product are always expensive." He uses the early \$2,000 cell phone as an example, and even references Moore's Law. This is a fallacious argument. First of all, cars may have some high-tech content, but they are not high-tech devices. Cars are electromechanical devices with many moving parts — motor, wheels, axles, gears, bearings, windows, doors — along with batteries, wiring, and metal structural pieces. A car, even a state-of-the-art electric car, is much more like the latest in washing machines, than a cell phone. Musk should be working on a 21st century version of a Model T, not an electric version of a Porsche; if he expects the taxpayers to help him.

Alan Zisser
Campbell

Let's not bail out makers of SUVs

Whenever a Hummer or other large SUV or pickup passes close by me on my bike, their side view mirror inches from my head, I say a little curse, aimed at the solo driver who would hardly notice if I were knocked to the ground and run over. And at the arrogance and self-centeredness

of people who design and build these behemoths as well as those who sell or buy them. Too many tons of steel and too many gallons of gasoline to transport too few pounds of human flesh. So, I'm not terribly interested in having my tax money go for a bailout of any of those people.

Bob Downs
Los Gatos

Someone must be held accountable

I would like to know where are the folks who believe government control yields us something of value? While Responsible Joe has been saving for a happy, independent old age, the government has allowed our economy to be leveraged out the back door. Joe's nest egg has been sucked into a black hole. So, are they sorry? Have they said so? Is that what Joe will eat in his old age? Is that what he will leave for his children? Heads should roll for the current crisis. It was avoidable. We want answers. We want to know the plan for recovery. We want responsibility.

Bud Kremer
San Jose

Kudos to staff on rosy rose garden

We are excited that the San Jose Rose Garden has had its accreditation reinstated. This is the culmination of a lot of hard work and dedication of many people. We want to commend the staff of the San Jose Parks Department, particularly Mike Will, Brandon Casper, Jeff Gomez, Lance Loveday, Mike Azevedo and Hugh Lykins, and let people know they were with us the whole way. Our volunteers really enjoy working with the garden staff and have built a very good relationship. It is this spirit of cooperation that made the transformation possible.

Terry Reilly
Beverly Rose Hopper
Founders
Friends of the San Jose
Rose Garden

Planet-saving energy technology invented 24 years ago

By Steve Kirsch

We are running out of time. Scientists tell us that if we are to avoid irreversible damage to our planet due to climate change, we need a prompt worldwide moratorium on constructing new coal plants and a gradual phaseout of all existing coal plants by 2030.

That isn't happening. Our best known climate scientist, James Hansen, has been traveling the globe, explaining the urgency, and exhorting world leaders to phase out coal completely. Leaders in Germany, the United Kingdom, and Japan politely listen and then ignore him. Germany, often held up as a model of government commitment to renewables, is plan-

Steve Kirsch is a high-tech serial entrepreneur and philanthropist. He wrote this article for the Mercury News.

SPECIAL TO THE MERCURY NEWS

ning to build more than 20 new coal plants.

Not a single world leader has heeded Hansen's advice. Not in the United States. Not anywhere.

So now what? If the world leaders who are doing the most to combat climate change aren't listening to our top climate scientists, what chance do we have to persuade countries with large greenhouse gas emissions, such as China and India, to change their behavior?

As the founder of five startup companies, I've faced similar problems many times where customers don't buy my product despite all the logical arguments that they should. The solution is the same: I change

the product or the pitch until I get a product and pitch that resonates with the buyer.

Now, suppose Hansen skipped the climate science lecture and simply told world leaders that there's now a new technology available for generating electric power. It's cheaper and cleaner than coal, produces minimal waste and generates power 24/7. The fuel supply is virtually inexhaustible and is safer than coal. The technology uses as fuel the long-lived "waste" from today's reactors, and you can build a plant anywhere you can locate a coal plant.

What world leader could resist such a pitch?

Believe it or not, such a power source actually exists. I lied about only one thing. It's not a new technology. It was invented 24 years ago by our country's top energy scientists at our most prestigious

national energy laboratory. The project, a new, fourth generation advanced nuclear design known as the Integral Fast Reactor (IFR) was led by Dr. Charles Till, then associate lab director at Argonne National Laboratory.

"No, that cannot be," you are thinking. "If that were true, then surely we would have heard about it and we'd be using it today."

Well, we probably would have heard about it if President Bill Clinton hadn't killed the project in 1994 because, as he said in his State of the Union speech in February 1993, the unlimited cheap clean power from this project was now "unnecessary."

Hansen, an expert on all things global warming, accidentally stumbled upon the IFR technology a few months ago and, now, after a lot of research, he's urging Obama to restart the project immediately.

Our government spent \$1 billion

over 10 years on this project. Our top scientists met every milestone. Why shouldn't we trust them to finish the job? Or shall we allow ignorance, misinformation, ideology and fear to once again triumph over science and facts?

The benefits are huge. The IFR technology could do wonders to re-energize our economy, improve our balance of trade, and fight global warming.

It's ready to be built. General Electric has a commercial design called the S-PRISM. It will cost about \$1 billion to restart the project and prove to the world that the claims are true.

If we are to avoid a climate crisis, we will need to show the world that there is a way to generate electric power that is more attractive than coal. The IFR does that. If there is not a better alternative, then what are we waiting for?