

Imagine billboards all along I-280

Since the 1960s, Peninsula residents have been fighting to keep the hills free of development. We've voted for and funded an open space district. We've stopped housing developments there. We've supported candidates who championed the environment. And we've rightfully taken pride in the unspoiled hills between the Bayside and the Coastside.



Dave Price

So it's hard to believe that the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors — a five member panel elected by residents — thinks its time to put up billboards along Interstate 280.

County Manager John Maltbie wants the county government to own the billboards and collect millions in advertising fees from companies that want to blast their messages to drivers on Interstate 280.

The hypocrisy of this is astounding. If a private property owner along 280 wanted to erect a billboard, the county would never let it happen. But I guess the rules are different when the county wants to do it.

Maltbie also wants county billboards on Highway 101, but that's probably less of an issue because many billboards exist there already and the route looks as ugly as the New Jersey Turnpike.

Still, even on 101 billboards can be

controversial. In 2013, Palo Alto City Manager Jim Keene proposed that the city put up a electronic billboard near the Baylands. I think he proposed that on a Thursday and the idea was dead three days later on Monday. The opposition was overwhelming.

But we're talking about San Mateo County where a lot of bad things fly under the radar. I wonder if the supervisors will even hear much opposition because people just don't pay attention to county governments like they do their city.

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Tax funds buying booze

There's something I don't understand about this controversy about San Mateo County Community College District Ron Galatolo buying \$100 bottles of wine with taxpayer funds.

I realize the elected board of the college district is defending him in the face of a report by NBC Bay Area that highlighted the alcohol he's billed to the district while on business trips.

Board president Richard Holober is saying the NBC report is a "nonissue" to the board and that we shouldn't "make a mountain over an ant hill."

What I don't understand is why should the taxpayers ever pay for alcohol consumed by government employees?

Holober says that if the chancellor is entertaining a big donor, buying

some alcohol would be appropriate. But Galatolo is getting paid \$304,000 a year. Why can't he put the booze on his own personal credit card? That's not too much to ask?

Voters have been generous in approving property tax increases for the college district, such as parcel taxes to operate the schools and bond measures for new buildings. Holober, his four colleagues on the board and Galatolo should be more respectful of the people whose hard-earned taxes support their district.

Their proposed new policy that allows Galatolo and other employees to continue to booze on the public's dime is ridiculous.

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'Weak cost controls'

Gov. Jerry Brown has been talking about raising gas taxes or sales taxes for highway maintenance, but a new state auditor's report says Caltrans is wasting the money it gets already.

The audit says Caltrans has "weak cost controls" that "create opportunities for fraud, waste and abuse."

I love how bureaucrats use terms like "weak cost controls" when they really mean they're wasting your money.

As an example, the auditor noted that the highway department spent \$250,000 six years ago to develop a modeling system to help it determine

where it should do maintenance, but Caltrans hasn't used the model.

Instead of distributing money based on need, Caltrans officials have allocated funds based on historic spending practices in each region.

As a result, the number of highway miles in need of maintenance has grown from 11,053 in 2011 to 15,272 last year, according to the audit. Caltrans is in charge of 50,000 lane miles statewide.

Overstaffed by 3,500 people

And Caltrans is falling behind even though it is vastly overstuffed, according to a 2014 report by the Legislative Analyst's Office, another independent watchdog. The analyst's office found that Caltrans has 3,500 engineers and others who are supposed to prepare and oversee construction projects, but they don't have much work to do.

"There is absolutely no good policy reason to use taxpayer funds to pay 3,500 people to just be sitting around at a desk," Assemblywoman Kristin Olsen, R-Modesto, told the Sacramento Bee in 2015.

Cutting those jobs would save taxpayers half a billion dollars a year. Something to think about when you're asked to approve more taxes for highway projects.

Editor Dave Price's column appears every Monday in the Post. His email address is price@padailypost.com.

LETTERS

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Dear Editor: This is directed to the San Mateo County Supervisors. The Post reported Wednesday that one or more of you had the bright idea of allowing billboards along Interstate 280. Perhaps it's time we voters registered our opinion by recalling those of you who support such a lame-brained, absurd idea?

Alexander Cannara
Menlo Park

San Mateo County Manager, in the pocket of the outdoor advertising industry? How dare he suggest putting up billboards on Interstate 280. He says that each billboard could generate \$7.8 million for the county over 30 years. That's \$719 per billboard a day. I'll bet the millions who use that lovely drive would gladly cough-up enough money to put John Maltbie in his place.

Urban Cummings
Palo Alto

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Dear Editor: Is John Maltbie, the

Official's \$1,000 trip

Dear Editor: Unreal! San Mateo

County Harbor District board member Sabrina Brennan bills the district for two nights in Morrow Bay for \$1,000.

My daughter, who lives in Los Angeles, went to the same Coastal Commission meeting as Brennan attended. She drove up, spoke, stayed until the end at 1 a.m. I think, drove home to LA and went to work the next day.

She's just a working person who surfs, not a big muckety-muck. But what the heck, it's only taxpayer money.

Jim Massey
Atherton

Law, people ignored

Dear Editor: I've recently read about three incidents in the Post about local government violating and ignoring the law (and the will of the people).

In Redwood City, after being sued and settling out of court, the Redwood City Council decided to ignore the settled agreement and instead contact the state about changing the law. This proposal could take months, if not years.

In Los Altos, the City Council is committing political revenge against the Commission on Senior Citizens, ever since the City Council didn't get

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