

Having just experienced the stunning dysfunction of government on the national level and also new budgetary restrictions in our own state, local towns are dealing with the repercussions in interesting ways. The idea that local communities are “on their own” is gaining traction as well as the idea that development money is less onerous than it used to be. Perspective-wise, it seems to depend on whether you hold office, run a business or just live in the city limits. After that it’s defined down to your operational scale -- appointed or elected, big business or small, 90% or 1% -- then down to boomers or millennials, old family or new -- it’s tough to sort out.

In northern California, these repercussions are gelling into Town Hall meetings, ballot initiatives and websites (SHWindow, for example). Citizens are organizing to directly define the growth of their town, passing on government in the process, while developers want to translate budget problems to their advantage and profit while they can.

Local organizing includes many people who want to return to previous eras when opportunities and resources were more naturally limited without government regulation. This view often reveals how near the proposed development is to one’s own location. Some want only “clean & small” development. Others want commercial development that can fund a city without having to scale up in population, crowding their “American dream”; and yet others support only humanity based development like affordable housing, with less emphasis on economic realities.

Next month, Sonoma will go to the polls to decide a [Special Election](#) on the number of hotel rooms allowed in a single development. [Healdsburg activists](#) are digging their heels in on hotels also and techies are forming national groups like [Code for America](#), which assist municipalities with more localized software, offer increased transparency and educate citizens in the process. In all cases, the common denominator is more local determinism and the new reality that the traditional top-down political decision-making (“trust us”) is losing out to the flatter model with its greater empowerment of all people in the community. Citizens groups now act; the age of reacting is over.

For communities without a great degree of social stratification, this transition is easier -- one-for-all works. However, for communities with tiers of social status or racial inequity, it becomes a struggle to get those with greater resources and power to share it for the greater good and welcome a new normal. Communities that choose to make rank a condition of membership cannot look forward to a successful future that now includes slower economic growth, climate change, greater population and less national consensus. Throw in a regional natural disaster or two and conflict comes sooner and more often. As a branded boutique destination, which for many defines status itself, Napa County is such a place.

When it is time for balance to be quantified or located, how should we make decisions? How many wine tasting shops or jewelry stores? Where should affordable housing be? Should wells be metered? Should people with more money get more water? All are a different forms of this basic question: Because resources are finite, who should give up what and at what cost? Sharing the burdens along with the benefits is the problem. It is time for a group reflection on what is known as “possession obsession”, the psychological belief that what we have now is more valuable than what we may gain in the future. Should this natural human fear of loss be what guides our decision-making or should we explore what could be for all who live here and decide to make it possible?