

# San Jose Mercury News

## Opinion: Why we should not dismiss plans for a new Solano County city

*Effort by tech billionaires who have purchased 55,000 acres is meeting local and Bay Area criticism*

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News that a group of tech billionaires has purchased 55,000 acres in eastern Solano County with plans to create a new city is meeting with criticism from local politicians and consternation from Bay Area thought leaders. But some objections to the new city do not hold water and Northern Californians should regard this development with cautious optimism.

Critics fault the proposed city for not being near transit, with the implication that it will lead to more driving and greenhouse gas emissions than the urban infill projects that local planners prefer. But the land accumulated by the investor group, Flannery Associates, is near the Capitol Corridor rail line which provides service to Sacramento and San Jose, along with transfers to BART in Richmond and Oakland. Today, departures on this line are limited and travel times are relatively long, but the Capitol Corridor Joint Powers Authority has a plan to increase and accelerate service.

Further, as communications technology improves and remote work becomes normalized, the need for residents of a new eastern Solano County city to commute should be limited. The new city will likely include a collection of densely populated, mixed-use communities. If that is the case, residents will live within a short walk, bike ride or scooter trip from shopping, dining, recreational, educational and co-working facilities, greatly reducing the need for local car trips.

Infill projects are great in theory, but often meet with stiff local resistance, which contributes to high construction costs and delays. The result is too often very expensive housing made affordable to some only through lavish taxpayer subsidies.

Another objection is that the new city will abut Travis Air Force Base purportedly creating a national security threat. But areas near the northeastern edge of the base are already built up, and concerns about security have yet to make news. This objection might also come as a surprise to residents of San Diego, many of whom live within walking distance of the city's naval facilities. Similarly, Colorado Springs residents live near Peterson Space Force Base and Tacoma residents are close to the gates of Joint Base Lewis-McChord.

There are further concerns about the stealthy way in which Flannery Associates acquired its real estate portfolio and the wealth of its investors. But if Flannery went public at the beginning, its acquisition costs would have been much higher. There is no evidence that sellers received less than market value for their land, which is all they could reasonably expect. And projects of the ultra-rich have been both good and bad. Among the lasting and well-regarded contributions of the super-rich are the New York Public Library (from Jacob Astor), Stanford University (Leland Stanford), and Public Broadcasting (initially funded by the Ford Foundation).

There is no guarantee that billionaires' efforts will succeed. They can be frustrated by personal vanity, poor execution or simple bad luck. The same can be said for efforts to start new cities. Sponsors need only look a few hundred miles south for a cautionary tale. California City, an intentional community in Kern County initially conceived in the late 1950s, has proven to be a spectacular failure. Fewer than 15,000 residents are scattered across the city's 204 square miles and most of the roads in its master plan were never paved.

But eastern Solano County has a better location almost equidistant from Sacramento and the East Bay. And, if local voters allow it to proceed, the new effort will be better funded than California City. So, while success cannot be assured, the new city appears to be a worthy effort and one that will hopefully move forward.

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