



## REVIVING CALIFORNIA COMMUNITY SUMMIT

Silicon Valley's Constitutional Convention

MAY 1, 2010

IF NOT NOW, WHEN? IF NOT US, WHO?

*"A key component of a democratic society is an informed voter. Sadly, that has become a progressively difficult goal to achieve in the state of California. Before people can help organize, they need to comprehend the incredibly complex issues on the table.*

*A conversation that involves the entire community is necessary to achieve the clarity and consensus around reform that will ultimately lead to effective and long lasting solutions; otherwise we will only have constituency-based outcomes that lead to future gridlock.*

*We believe that a clear understanding of all potential reform issues is more important – at this juncture – than determining the actual vehicle of reform. That will come. In the end, what matters is a slate of reforms that make sense for all Californians, determined of the people, by the people and for the people".*

Rick Callender (Class XIX) and Mark Jensen (Class IX) and, ALF Senior Fellows in a Guest Comment in Silicon Valley/San Jose Business Journal (July 10, 2009)

### REVIVING CALIFORNIA

The current culture of advocacy and polarity has compromised the public space for dialogue. American Leadership Forum - Silicon Valley (ALF) and the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation formed the Common Good Collaborative to develop the skills and leadership capacity needed to nurture participative dialogue in Silicon Valley. ALF has partnered with other community-based organizations across multiple sectors to address complex issues of importance to Silicon Valley. The work of the collaborative is based on the belief that ineffective and/or unsustainable outcomes are rarely of too little action but rather action that is not grounded in a deep understanding of diverse views.

As part of the effort to engage the Silicon Valley community around the issue of reforming California's governance and budget structure, Reviving California has organized Town Hall meetings, Public Square Dialogues, monthly lunches with a variety of speakers, and a series of community dialogues. ALF has also partnered with more than 25 Silicon Valley organizations to form the Silicon Valley Collaborative for Reform with the purpose of educating, engaging and empowering the community on issues relating to reforming the governance of California and with the following specific goals in mind:

- *To bring diverse groups of people into a common dialogue and collaboration through nurtured community partnerships*
- *To be an actively engaged Silicon Valley community that remains a strong voice for the common good*
- *To join forces in engaging the community on the issue of California reform in 2010 and beyond*
- *To inform organizations proposing reform about Silicon Valley ideas and collective input in a "bottoms-up" approach*

#### MAY 1 COMMUNITY SUMMIT

A major effort of the Reviving California initiative was to organize a Community Summit on May 1, 2010 at the Paseo de César Chávez – a public square on campus of San José State University. This event was organized in partnership with Joint Venture: Silicon Valley Network, San José State University, De Anza College, Bill Lane Center for the American West and San Jose Chamber of Commerce.

More than 200 people came together to discuss some of the major areas of reform that are being considered during the elections in June and November 2010. We chose to convene this Summit on May 1 before the onslaught of television ads hit the airwaves with 30 second sound-bites rather than thoughtful dialogue about the reform efforts on the June 8 ballot.

Participants came from many walks of life, (19% business, 17% government, 14% civic and 14% education, 13% students with 5-6% each from the arts, social services and faith-based organizations). From teens to retirees, all participants shared their perspective of how government in the State of California is failing them. Whether Democrat (70%), Independent (16%), or Republican (9%), all participants voiced concern about the complexity of the issues currently facing California and about the potential unintended consequences of our actions and the need for serious and open deliberation.

## CONTENT

Our intention was not to debate the ballot measures, but rather to come together as citizens and learn from different perspectives on various reform efforts so that individuals could make thoughtful decisions at the ballot box. In addition, the purpose was to provide a context for overall and long-term reform within which to view the proposed ballot measures instead of looking at them as isolated changes. We did not hope to gain consensus, but rather to encourage participation; to engage citizens in the work of democracy.

The spirit of the day was set in a series of opening comments that focused the intention of working together. The comments focused on the current situation faced by citizens and leaders. As summarized by one speaker, while we may elect good people who want to make a difference, we also need to examine the structure that we are working with. Reform is needed to improve the tools of governance and can only be achieved as a result of citizens and leaders working together.

There was general agreement that citizens are finding it increasingly difficult to discern good information. Many felt that this was caused by the decreasing role of print media and the increased use of social media that often provides very biased interpretations. There was general agreement that public forums, such as the one held on this day, may play an increasing role in helping citizens to deliberate issues prior to elections.

## FORMAT

The format was a careful balance between presentations and small group dialogues. The small group dialogues ensured that everyone was given a space to speak. Each of the small groups had as part of it, a couple of experts whose role was to listen, provide information as needed and to stimulate additional dialogue.

Participants deliberated two important issues. First, they considered needs and opportunities for reforming the primary election process. Second, they considered specific opportunities for reforming the California budget process.

## PRIMARY ELECTIONS

In deliberating the potential for modifying the primary election process, many participants voiced concern that more moderate politicians will be needed to work on the many complex issues that we face. This feeling stemmed from a shared sense that polarization and partisanship dominates the political discourse in Sacramento.

Deliberations focused on the need for more moderates to be elected, yet there was no agreement as to whether a change to open primaries would support an effort to elect more moderates.

Some participants expressed concern that those with special interests would still manipulate a new system. For others, some form of change, even with concerns of unintended consequences, was worth voting for at this juncture.

## PUBLIC FINANCING OF ELECTIONS

In deliberating the role of election financing, participants shared a general concern about the role of special interest groups in funding individual campaigns and issues. Many participants felt that effective change should create more transparency, less dependence on corporate or special interest financing, and more opportunities for minority candidates and candidates without their own source of financing to enter the race on a level playing field.

## BUDGET PROCESS

In deliberating the budget process, voices of frustration were more commonly heard. Deliberations centered on how to remedy the frustrated, distrusting and angry attitudes that citizens have developed. In general, there was agreement on the need for greater transparency and accountability, but far less agreement on how to accomplish this.

While the small group discussions reflected concerns about the political implications of moving to a simple majority vote for State budgets, at the end of the day, voting reflected a strong preference for this change. Additionally, while participants felt that such a change could result in the minority party being shut out of the budgeting process, they still felt strongly that new taxes and fees should not be held to a higher 2/3rds vote standard. This consensus may reflect the make-up of participants or it may reflect the willingness of people to accept risk in order to create change and to hold someone accountable for change.

Participants also strongly supported the concept that all new initiatives should be required to identify how they would be funded. There was strong agreement that the unanticipated effects of initiatives are a significant part of the existing budget problem. There was less agreement or understanding of exactly just how much of the current budget is dedicated to the funding of initiatives; *this is an area where information could help citizens to better deliberate the issue.*

Of great significance was the strong agreement found at the end of the session. Even after sitting in dialogue amongst strangers holding diverse perspectives, participants expressed their commitment to staying involved in reforming California.

What might this involvement look like? Participants expressed a desire to continue the conversations they had with family and friends and to advance awareness of the issues and the need to vote in coming elections.

At the close of the summit, a group of high school students presented their personal perspective on the need for, and commitment to, change. The final student, Homaira Hosseini, left the audience with a vision for why citizens must continue the dialogue of revival and reform: "Remember our faces when you think of the future of California!" (For more details on KEY IDEAS GENERATED, refer to Appendix A).

## CALL TO ACTION

Reviving California will be a long and sustained process. The dialogue on May 1, 2010 was one of the first steps. As part of our continued effort, we developed a matrix that included endorsements from major newspapers and political organizations for the ballot measures on the June 8 election. This was sent out to hundreds of people on our email list prior to the June 8 election, and we received positive feedback on its usefulness. In addition, we are continuing with our 50 Community Dialogues to bring diverse groups of people into a common dialogue and collaboration.

Through the website ([alfsv.org/revivingca](http://alfsv.org/revivingca)) and Facebook ([facebook.com/revivingca](https://facebook.com/revivingca)), we provide updates on reform related ideas and events

ALF has partnered with California Forward in its Community Engagement project, which will include dialogues throughout the State. As the lead organization in Silicon Valley, ALF will continue to work through its Senior Fellow network and its network of organizations to spearhead the conversations around reform and in the process, create an infrastructure for deliberative democracy.

Another summit, similar to May 1<sup>st</sup>, will be held on October 2<sup>nd</sup> at De Anza College and will focus on the ballot measures on the November 2010 election.

## APPENDIX A: KEY IDEAS GENERATED

The small group dialogues generated many ideas that were captured by scribes. Included below are some of the ideas that surfaced. These are listed not in any particular order but are included here to provide a flavor of the discussions.

### GENERAL THEMES

- Many suggested that we need to **look at other cities, states and countries to see what works**. Maine and Arizona have had success in campaign finance reform, and Europe has a voting system (proportional voting) that works. Britain limits the length of campaigns. Other places have variations on the open and closed primary systems.
- Many comments reflected concerns about the complexity of the issues that California faces and potential **unintended consequences** of any changes.
  - For example, there was discussion about the open primary and whether it would help or hurt voter turnout in the primary and in general elections.
- Participants are concerned about **changes in the media landscape** and how it affects both elections and governance.
  - Newspapers are disappearing and it's becoming harder to find good coverage of state issues.
  - Not everyone is comfortable with the role of online news and social media, especially with the reliability of the information disseminated by unconventional media outlets.
  - The media need to enable candidates to communicate with voters, and provide a forum for community discussion of issues.
- A few participants and conversation starters reminded everyone to **focus on a positive future**. Remember our values as a community. Silicon Valley is still a leader in technology.
- We all **need to take responsibility**. "We are the leaders we have been waiting for."

### OPEN PRIMARY

- Participants are very concerned about the polarization and partisanship causing the current gridlock in Sacramento.
  - Many would like to see more moderates elected. There is disagreement about how to accomplish this, though many feel the open primary would help.
  - More and more voters are frustrated with the parties and are registering as "decline to state."
  - Participants are concerned about the influence of the two major political parties, and are mindful of the impact that proposed changes might have on smaller parties. Again, there is disagreement about exactly what that impact would be.

- Some would like to move to non-partisan elections, such as those held for some local offices. Others suggest getting rid of the primaries altogether and having only the general election.
- Participants would like to consider other voting systems, such as proportional and rank choice voting, instant runoff, the top-two primary, etc. Many participants were interested in the European proportional voting system, which is being used in some local elections in California. One mentioned the parliamentary system.
- Concerns were raised about how various primary systems might invite “sabotage,” with voters registering for a party they disagree with to select weaker candidates in a primary, or registering as “decline to state” simply to gain access to other primaries, etc.
- How will redistricting change things? Will more moderates be elected? We should also look at the size of the legislature and the size of the districts.

## CAMPAIGN FINANCE

- The biggest concern from most of the tables regarding campaign financing related to special interests. Many would like to get special interest money out of politics, while others suggest that there’s a role for special interest groups. These groups can represent concerned citizens who care enough to get involved with civic and advocacy groups. Some suggested that there’s a difference between corporate contributions to campaigns or insurance companies sponsoring a ballot initiative and civic groups like the Sierra Club.
- Nearly all comments reflected a feeling that the current system is broken.
  - Campaigns are too expensive overall, and money has too much influence on who can run (several commented on the obvious influence of personal wealth in the governor’s race), who gets elected and how the elected officials vote once they get into office.
  - Many would like to see public funding for campaigns as a way to fix these problems. Candidates might have to raise seed money or demonstrate a certain level of support to get the public funding. Public funding, according to its proponents, would:
    - Level the playing field;
    - Allow more minority and low-income candidates to run;
    - Allow weaker voices to be heard;
    - Reduce the overall cost of elections;
    - Prevent elected officials from being beholden to their funders; and
    - Allow candidates to focus attention on all voters, not just those with money to donate.
  - A number of people suggested some sort of compromise between public and private financing, including making public funding available for certain offices, (especially judicial elections, where private fundraising is nearly impossible) and putting stricter limits on private donations. A couple of tables discussed the idea of each voter having an amount of public money to designate to the campaigns of their choice.

- Many people expressed a desire for more transparency about the funding of both candidates and ballot measures.
- There were a few concerns about public funding for campaigns with issues such as free speech laws and where the money would come from to cover the cost of elections.
- Some participants think various new or different regulations for elections should be considered.
  - Limit television advertising for candidates, or provide free and equal access to all candidates.
  - Limits on when candidates can fundraise and actively campaign would save money. Many participants favored shortening the campaign season. At the same time, there was a concern that reducing election spending would mean reducing the amount of information available to voters.

## BUDGET

- There is a lot of frustration about the budget.
  - The current budget process seems to decrease trust in government and in elected officials. The discussion about the budget was more heated than about some other topics during the day, and seemed to focus much more on anger, blame and demands for accountability.
    - Several tables mentioned imposing penalties on legislators when the budget is not passed on time, or requiring them to stay in session in Sacramento until it passes.
  - People don't understand where their money is going, and want more transparency.
  - People don't feel that their state tax money comes back to help their cities and counties.
  - Many people feel that the government is inefficient, has not managed its money well, and that California has not lived within its means, which is why there are so many problems.
  - People are concerned about maintaining a safety net as well as about investing in infrastructure.
- Each possible system has advantages and disadvantages.
  - Keeping the 2/3rds requirement keeps the majority party in check, but some feel it grants too much power to the minority party, and it makes it much more difficult to pass a budget on time.
  - Moving to a simple majority would be more democratic, according to some, but the minority party could end up completely shut out of the budget process.
  - Some suggested moving to a different standard, such as 55% or 60% to pass a budget, as a compromise. Another suggestion was to allow a simple majority to pass a budget, but only if it's done on time. Still another thought was to have a simple majority unless the budget would be increasing by more than a specified amount, like 5%.

- Many tables mentioned moving to a simple majority on the budget but keeping the 2/3rds rule for tax and fee increases.
  - Some participants would like to see a 2-year budgeting cycle.
- Proposition 13 was mentioned at many tables.
  - It has allowed some people to stay in their homes.
  - It has created problems for local governments who are unable to raise revenue, and has also limited revenue at the state level.
  - Prop 13 applies to both corporate and residential property. Some believe that it should remain as-is for homeowners, but be changed for corporations.
- Many participants are concerned with the link between the budget and the economy.
  - Some feel the state should focus on creating jobs and growing the economy, which will increase revenue for the state and ease the budget problems.
  - Many worry that raising taxes on businesses will cause them to leave the state. Some feel that business gets too many tax credits and doesn't pay its share.
- The role of the initiative process in the budget came up frequently.
  - Many felt that initiatives should be required to specify a source of funding. Unfunded initiatives such as three strikes have damaged the budget.
  - A number of tables felt that the initiative process has left legislators' hands tied and that they don't have a lot of discretion on the budget.
  - There is a great deal of confusion about exactly how much of the budget is locked in by initiatives.
- People are frustrated about taxes.
  - Several said California has high tax rates compared to other states.
  - Tables discussed changes to the tax structure that might help, such as taxing services, or modifying the sales tax in other ways.

## INITIATIVE PROCESS

- Many people believe that the initiative process needs to be reformed.
  - Specify source of funding when initiatives will cost money. However, this is "ballot box budgeting" and further ties the hands of the legislature.
  - Move to electronic signature gathering to save money.
  - Increase the number of signatures required to get an initiative on the ballot.
  - Require that initiatives be submitted for a review of constitutionality before they go on the ballot.
  - Allow the legislature to change initiatives after several years.
  - Get rid of the initiative process altogether.
- There is a lot of concern about the role of money in the process. It costs a lot (some say too much) to get things on the ballot. Many initiatives are backed by corporations or special interests.
- Voters are confused and lack good information.
  - Many people don't trust that paid signature gatherers are well informed.
  - Advertising is confusing and often misrepresents propositions. Things are taken out of context.

- Many voters never see the full text of a proposition.
- Initiatives are a difficult way to deal with very complex issues that California faces. Reforming the state one initiative at a time is too slow for some, but many think it's better than nothing.
- The initiative process was intended to fix egregious problems and act as a check on the government. We elect legislators to do the work of governing, because voters can only do so much.

## VOTER EDUCATION AND TURNOUT

- Many agreed that we need to increase voter participation and make sure that people are well-informed.
  - Pre-register 17 year olds.
  - Mail-in voting or electronic voting/voter registration.
  - Make voting mandatory.
  - Get people involved in their neighborhoods.
  - Young people need to be educated about politics and the voting system.
  - Currently the voter turnout doesn't reflect the diversity of California, and that needs to be fixed.