

Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association

# California Commentary

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## Becoming a Third World Country

By Jon Coupal

To visitors, the signs that mark a third world country are obvious. Crumbling infrastructure, people sleeping in doorways, a wide gap between rich and poor, little or no middle class, limited government services unless you pay “extra,” and all political and economic power concentrated in the hands of a small elite minority whose sole mission is to perpetuate their power and wealth.

These characteristics also describe the once proud city of Los Angeles where disintegrating sidewalks are fixed only when homeowners agree to come up with extra cash. Los Angeles, where subsidizing downtown development projects for already wealthy business interests takes priority over picking up the trash — another service for which homeowners will now pay extra.

It is the City of Angels that levies an art tax, but can't seem to fix the potholes in the streets unless residents are willing to pony up extra in the form of a proposed \$1.5 Billion infrastructure bond.

Los Angeles voters have approved *four* school district bonds in 9 years, putting taxpayers on the hook for repaying nearly \$28 Billion, including interest, yet the district is failing so badly at educating children that there is now a titanic struggle between the city's mayor and the school board over who will steer this sinking ship.

Los Angeles residents are told they must pay

more for trash collection if they want more police to protect them from gang crime. Yet the city continues with Special Order 40 in force, which limits the ability of police to apprehend illegal alien gang members.

City leaders show an arrogant disrespect for the views of average citizens. When hundreds made the effort to show up at city hall to speak in opposition to a 154 percent increase in the trash collection fee, councilmembers limited many to only a few seconds of comment. However, the rules were bent for a former colleague who was given five minutes to blivate about perceived inequities in the three-strikes law, an issue that was not on the agenda.

City residents must be prepared for electric service interruptions on hot, peak use days. The city-owned utility cannot afford to maintain aging transformers because 10 percent of its income is funneled away by City Hall to fund pet projects.

However, those same officials who are pikers when it comes to providing services to city residents can be generous to those interests that support them. Double-digit pay increases for public employee unions, who have backed winning council and mayoral candidates, have become more the rule than the exception.

While homeowners struggle to pay for the four school district bonds, two community college bonds, previous city bonds for police facili-

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ties and the zoo, several assessments for parks, a parcel tax imposed by the county for trauma centers, and some of the highest utility user taxes in the state, city councilmembers want to *increase* this burden.

They are proposing a \$1.5 Billion bond to fix the streets, a service residents of most other cities take for granted, and a \$1 Billion low income housing bond, the costs of which will be added to the property tax bill. Ironically, the council really believes it can provide more affordable housing by *increasing* the cost of owning a home.

In Los Angeles, a city that a generation ago epitomized the middle class lifestyle, those in the middle are fleeing, leaving behind a city made up of the fabulously wealthy and the working poor.

Yet, councilmembers are so convinced of the value of their management skills, that they, and the firms that have spent millions to lobby them into submission, are proposing an extension of term limits. Straight-faced, the highest paid city officials in the nation speak of the loss to the community of their skills if their terms are not extended.

Of course, if voters do not agree to an extension, and councilmembers are required to seek other employment, they may want to consider placing employment wanted ads in classified sections of prominent newspapers in third world countries. It is *there* they will most likely find a match for their policy and management skills.

Los Angeles, love it or hate it, has been the California pacesetter for decades. Residents of the rest of the state should pay close attention to how Los Angeles addresses its problems. Unlike Vegas, what happens here does not stay here. Los Angeles is like the canary in the coal mine — for many Californians, it is the harbinger of things to come.

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