

VIEWPOINT

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor

Send letters to the Silicon Valley Business Journal
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▶ READERS DECIDE

WHAT'S YOUR BIG BUSINESS WORRY?

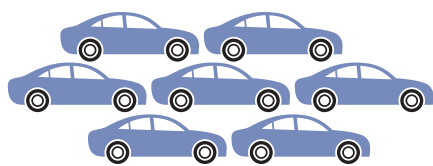
A survey of Silicon Valley CEOs listed housing, employee retention, transportation and tax reform as top concerns (read more on page 10). We asked readers to pinpoint their biggest stress point.

What's your top business worry?



37%

Employee recruiting/retention



15%

Transportation dysfunction



19%

Housing costs for your employees



30%

Tax reform

VOTES CAST: 188

▶ LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

The Business Journal welcomes letters to the editor. Please send your thoughts to the contact information listed above.

The best letters are short, usually less than 300 words, and make a point clearly. We reserve the right to edit and/or reject submissions. All letters must include the author's name and a way to contact the author.

GUEST COMMENTARY



THINKSTOCK

Housing fix? Think small

Let's imagine a Silicon Valley that tackled housing affordability as boldly and inventively as it does products and software. What might it look like?

I imagine it would consider all possibilities, experiment with the unproven, and learn fast. It might well look to the pioneers worldwide exploring how to live well – and maybe better – in small, mobile, shared and/or off-grid housing.

Frontiers are opening up due to technological advances – think solar power, prefabrication and online sharing platforms like Uber. And social changes such as more solo households, higher job mobility and preference for more walkable places are making change inevitable. What can we make of this?

We might, in our mobile cities of tomorrow, compete to attract tomorrow's entrepreneurs and citizens with the most innovative and affordable housing – rather than letting our cities be shackled and divided by rapidly rising prices.

In particular, we might do this cost-effectively by adapting some of the vast area currently used for streets and parking. Much of this is already disused – for example, the edges of most surface lots – and is likely to become more so as car use declines. In the meantime, car-sharing, biking



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(and someday perhaps driverless car use) will spread.

Imagine allowing new, tiny houses and modular housing to be built on the area of a few parking spaces on a surface parking lot, at a corporate campus, or through a residential garage conversion. These tiny houses might be movable, to be relocated as longer-term redevelopment occurs on a site, or as market needs change, or as residents move. They might be owned by their occupants, or rented out by a city, developer or employer.

These “houslets” could be partly or fully off-grid, using solar power, water tanks and composting toilets. They might be ordered as kits, ready-made from many current suppliers or be designed by local architects.

This may sound improbable compared to current building practices. But I believe it's not only possible. It's a sensible way to respond quickly to our housing affordability crisis and engage the region's greatest strength, a culture of creative innovation. If Silicon Valley wants to live up to its rhetoric of dealing with big problems, here's a handy one to start with.

Such innovation might begin with demonstration projects sponsored by cities, nonprofits, or companies.

Flexibility in regulations, such as those that govern structures that are mobile or below 120 square feet can facilitate experimentation. To draw on a nearby example, San Francisco is considering allowing new “in-law units” within buildings.

In the longer term, broader change can occur by reforming building and planning codes towards what urbanist pioneer Andres Duany calls “Lean Urbanism” (analogous to the “Lean Startup” religion practiced by technologists).

That means allowing us to organize around values and goals, continually learn, and act expeditiously to discover solutions – rather than being captured by received practices.