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?

nostic image of a business person sitting at a desk.

37% Employee recruiting/retention

15% Transportation dysfunction

19% Housing costs for your employees

30% Tax reform

VOTES CAST: 188

GUEST COMMENTARY

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

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.

Tim McCormick is a designer and product developer in Palo Alto, and lives in a 200-square-foot converted one-car garage. @tmccormick | tfm.org

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