

Issues & Ideas

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Modesto and all of Stanislaus County should have well-paying jobs and a vital economy, says the budding Stanislaus 2030 initiative.

Let's be intentional about a booming Stanislaus. Here's how

BY THE MODESTO BEE EDITORIAL BOARD

Imagine having supreme confidence that your grown children will find jobs in Modesto or Stanislaus County paying enough for them to comfortably raise their own families here.

Imagine businesses competing to move here because the quality of our workforce has a terrific reputation and not because we pay rock-bottom wages.

There is a lot to like about our beloved home community. But the above scenarios unfortunately do not ring true for most of our people.

That can change, if enough people decide they want it to. Some of the most dedicated among us say they want things to change. And they are laying a foundation to make it happen.

It's called Stanislaus 2030. It's big, it's bold, and its initial effort has earned the support of The Modesto Bee.

In simple terms, Stanislaus 2030 is a collaborative of leaders across every sector — business, education and govern-

ment. They are driven to be intentional about building a vital economy, they say. No longer will our success rely on an accidental slip into prosperity, because that approach just isn't realistic.

Being intentional means having a plan. The Stanislaus Community Foundation deserves credit for pulling together the pieces needed to create a good one.

For more than two years, the community foundation has quietly enlisted key players in our community, plus some from without. Perhaps most important is the vaunted Brookings Institution, a Washington, D.C.-based think tank and research giant that already is hard at work compiling data on every conceivable portion of our economy, from workforce training and labor to costs of production and export opportunities.

This is a big deal, people. Brookings isn't known for working with populations as small as ours — 558,000 in Stanislaus County. They must see something we might not

even see ourselves. "There are seismic, sea-level changes in our community," said Marian Kaanon, the community foundation's chief executive officer.

Stanislaus landscape shifting. For example, all these years we have lacked what are called a community development corporation (CDC) and a community development financial institution (CDFI). A mouthful, yes, but absolutely critical for boosting underserved areas. Think of them as ATMs dispensing money for low-income services.

Just a few months ago, we finally landed a CDC when a local nonprofit, South Modesto Partnerships, evolved into Stanislaus Equity Partners, and in just the past month, two local credit unions — Valley First in Modesto, and Rolling F in Turlock — became certified CDFIs.

Another unexpected blessing came this year from Washington, D.C. in the form of COVID-19 stimulus money. Our county and cities suddenly have funding like never before —

collectively, hundreds of millions of dollars.

"I don't think this is our last opportunity. I think it's our best," said Mani Grewal, a county supervisor and Modesto businessman.

What if some of that money could be used to reshape us? Can we decide that being just a bedroom community to the wealthier Bay Area is no longer good enough?

We can. But again, it won't happen by accident.

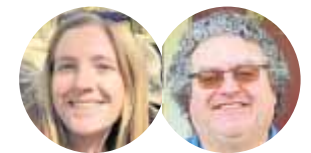
Some of our strongest businesses put up \$220,000 to develop a plan. County leaders kicked in \$450,000, using stimulus money from the American Rescue Plan Act. That's a good start. Modesto and others cities are expected to contribute as the initiative gains momentum.

A couple of months ago, Stanislaus 2030 began a 10-month sprint to develop the plan, as revealed by Bee reporter Kristina Karisch. Its first milestone is expected in February, when data gathered,

SEE EDITORIAL, 2C

Combating illegal marijuana grows in national forest

BY MEGAN FISKE AND RYAN HENSON



While cannabis has been legalized in California for nearly five years, the illegal growing of marijuana on California's public lands has steadily increased.

Thousands of cartel-controlled trespass grows are ruining California's public lands by killing wildlife, depleting and contaminating our water sources, and making many places we love to visit potentially dangerous.

While most of these operations have been historically located in northern California, they are expanding throughout the state, including the Stanislaus National Forest where there have been multiple grow operations identified in the Tuolumne River drainage alone.

Trespass farms take a destructive toll on our environment. Cartel operators remove native riparian vegetation critical to many species of wildlife and they routinely use deadly pesticides that contaminate both soil and water. They use a tremendous amount of water as well, leaving little to support the native ecosystem.

In the San Joaquin Valley, every drop of our water is important, especially during drought. Water for residential use and farming, an integral part of our rural livelihoods, is threatened by operations that steal and divert water upstream of our farmers and residents. Statewide, it is estimated that trespass grows consume enough water to supply a town of 50,000 people for an entire year.

In recent years these trespass operations have been the cause of major wildfires, destroying homes, lives and watersheds. According to research done by the Cannabis Removal on Public Lands Project, trespass grows have burned a minimum of 285,000 acres on California's public lands, costing billions in suppression efforts.

In addition to causing fires, trespass operations can keep firefighters from putting them out. Cal Fire has reported firefighters confronted by armed growers who often set booby traps and leave explosive ammunition to deter firefighters and law enforcement.

Officials commonly find banned and deadly pesticides including carbofuran, which can impair the nervous system and cause tremors, convulsions, and

SEE MARIJUANA, 2C

Students are showing America what school shootings are like

BY ROBIN EPLEY
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We owe it to the students at Oxford High School in Michigan to hear their screams and to watch their tears. We owe it to them to seek out their TikTok, Snapchat and Instagram videos, full of bullets and running and terror — to let ourselves fall into the fear and relief and overwhelming sadness they feel, and

to watch it again and again until we are overwhelmed ourselves.

Because this generation is running out of ways to make us care.

It is sad. It is uncomfortable and it is overwhelming. You may want to look away. But if you are unaccustomed to seeing these videos, then I invite you to sit in that discomfort and terror for a moment. I assure you, your children are watching these videos, whether or not you have seen them. Their friends share them with whispers, and they watch them in the hallways at school, wondering where they would hide. They watch them late at night under the covers,

feeling unsafe in their own beds. They live with this terror every day, and so should we. We cannot allow ourselves to become numb to the frequency of mass shootings at our schools. We cannot allow ourselves to shrug off yet another mass shooting.

This isn't the first time students have filmed their experiences inside school shootings, but it is perhaps the first time that we have been able to watch children interact with an immediate threat — and what those children have to do to protect themselves. Mark Kluska, a 15-year-old Oxford High School freshman, had the presence of mind to turn on a camera while

his classmates spoke to someone they thought was the shooter through their classroom door. It is not a stretch of the imagination to believe Kluska thought he was documenting his last moments on this earth.

Kluska continued to film as students maintained their calm, identified speech patterns in the voice on the other side of the door, and concluded that the person was a threat. They began to crush around a back window and fled for their lives, rushing across a snow-covered courtyard into the arms of actual law enforcement.

If we ignore these videos, then we turn a blind eye to the pain and confusion that we are forcing our children to endure in the name of the Second Amendment. If we ignore this, we tell Madsyn Baldwin, Tate Myre, Justin Shilling and Hana St. Juliana that their fear and their

deaths are an acceptable price to pay for the right to own a gun.

Baldwin, who was 17 and a talented artist. Myre, 16, was a linebacker and tight end on the school's football team. Shilling, who was a champion bowler, and St. Juliana — the youngest killed that day at just 14 — a freshman whose parents described her as "one of the happiest and most joyful kids." Two more students are in critical condition and seven more are at the hospital, including a teacher.

If we ignore these videos, you ignore that 20 babies in Newtown, Conn. should be experiencing high school as juniors and seniors this year; the same age as many of those killed in Michigan last week. If we choose not to watch these

SEE EPLEY, 2C

LETTERS

Remembering Bob Dole, true patriot

When I was 16 years old, I had the privilege to work in the U.S. Senate as a senate page representing Republican S.I. Hayakawa. I worked for four months on the Republican side of the Senate doing menial tasks but mainly observing Bob Dole in action as the majority leader of the Senate. It was with great sadness that I read that Dole died of lung cancer. Along with many other Republicans, he represented party and country with kindness and grace.

Now the Republicans have leaders like Marjorie Taylor Greene who says that the Las Vegas shooting that killed 58 people was staged and another Republican (Thomas Massie) who takes a Christmas picture with his family all carrying guns asking Santa for ammo.

The Republican Party needs to remember their past leaders like Bob Dole, who was filled with love and service to his country, and stop their message of death and hate.

Joanne Vega, Modesto

Concert goes remove masks

It was a great pleasure to attend the Gallo Arts Center's traditional Holiday Pops concert after a seemingly endless COVID suspension. The center staff reasonably and dutifully verified the vaccination status of all patrons. Immediately after is where the social contract broke down. A large number of audience members simply removed their masks in a proud scofflaw display of defiance. When I asked several attendees seated next to us to don their masks, I was aggressively, chip-on-the-shoulder responded to with "mind your own business!"

There is a saying that laws are only as good as their enforcement.

Andrew Stone, Modesto

Resist takeover, Turlock Fire

On Dec. 5 I needed the

Turlock Fire Department for a non-emergency. They arrived in a timely manner and completed the requested task with kindness, professionalism, and patience. I thank them publicly and voice my concern about (the idea of) Modesto taking over our fire department. I do not see the benefits of this.

Perhaps the City Council could explain why they would give millions of dollars to take over our fire department when we have such a fine one to begin with.

Celeste Ameer, Turlock

Sheriff is fear-mongering

Re "Here's how to curb smash-and-grab theft" (Page 6A, Dec. 9): It was appropriate to put Sheriff Dirkse's article in the opinion section since his statement about our community becoming more dangerous and unstable is really just his opinion and fear-mongering. In fact a quick search in the California Department of Justice website OpenJustice.doj.ca.gov shows how 2019 had the lowest occurrence of property crimes and violent crimes in the last 10 years.

NPR in April listed the pros and cons of increasing police officers in a city. Adding 10-17 police officers at an average cost of \$1.3 million to \$2.2 million saves one life per year. More interaction with police does not always lead to positive outcomes. The best outcome is for police to focus their current manpower on solving serious crimes and less manpower on petty crimes.

The sheriff should look at how he is using the general fund, which if I'm reading it correctly, is \$153 million.

David Reyes, Turlock

Harder still faces GOP threat

Re "Harder rakes in money warning against Nunes threat that didn't materialize" (Page 8A, Dec. 8): Why in the world would Rep. Harder return



money that was given when there was a real threat that Devin Nunes would challenge him for his congressional seat? The national GOP has a war chest and they have already indicated that they are targeting Rep. Harder in whatever the new district map looks like. He has been on their hit list since February 2021. The GOP wants Rep. Harder gone and they want to take back the House. Just because the threat didn't materialize doesn't mean that there won't be another one in the near future.

Colleen Norby, Modesto

This isn't just civil disobedience

Re "Stanislaus freedom supporters aren't all 'angry, violent, toxic'" (Page 1C, Nov. 5): I disagree with Charles Byrd. Unmasked protesters mobbing public meetings and threatening officials with violence aren't peaceful. Flouting mask and distance conventions, they prevent those who don't want to contribute to super-spreader events from voicing our opinions. The Nov. 14 article illustrates how such protesters subvert democracy by threatening officials. "You will know them by their fruits," Matthew 7:16. This is not the nonviolent civil disobedience of Thoreau.

I further disagree with Byrd's characterization of public education, our best

preparation for democracy. The purpose of public education is not to "indoctrinate in ideologies," as Byrd purports, but to educate. History, not CRT, is taught in the public schools. It has been said that since little Ruby Bridges had the courage to integrate her first-grade classroom, parents should have the courage to let their children hear her story. Parents in Modesto have protested A.P./I.B. text selections. They may opt out for another book, but they should not have the right to prevent other youth from reading and studying these exemplary works of literature. The Jan. 6 insurrection demonstrated the results of violent "protest." Let it end there.

Marianne Villalobos, Modesto

Columns should reflect diversity

The Modesto Bee editorial board needs to exercise an equity and inclusivity lens before sending editions to print. Most authors of every issue are men; the front page of the Sunday "Issues and Ideas" section are all articles by (white) men. It is tiring and disappointing. As women, we grow up used to reading mostly male authors in school; we've all grown up reading mostly male journalists' work; we are used to seeing lists of great books that are almost all written by

(white) men.

The Modesto Bee can do better. To be relevant to readers, authors need to reflect the demographic of Stanislaus County. Having at least half women, at least half Latino authors in every issue would send a message that The Bee is committed to ensuring a diversity of voices, not just the same voices and faces we've all been listening to our whole lives.

Elizabeth Campbell Morrison, Modesto

It's a matter of priority

We will continue to have school shootings for one reason: America has collectively agreed that the ability to purchase a gun is more important than the lives of children and young adults in schools.

Tim De Lorimier, Modesto

GOP legislators fear each other

In 2018 I walked a precinct to campaign for a local Democrat. At one house, when I identified myself as a volunteer for the Democratic Party, the man who answered the door shouted, "I hate Democrats!" I took a step back and apologized for troubling him, and as I turned to walk away he called out in a friendly voice, "Have a nice day." Wait, what?

Since then I have read a

half dozen books on how the two political parties have become so polarized. It blossomed during the Tea Party era and became more vitriolic during the previous administration. Today, according to many reporters, Republican members of Congress will say privately that they agree with their Democratic colleagues, but they fear for their own and their families' safety if they go on record opposing anything that the Republican Party supports, no matter how insignificant the issue or how damaging to the country it might be. And now I am fearful for our democracy.

Do I hate Republicans? No, but I hate what the Republican Party has become.

Anita Young, Modesto

Living one's faith

What makes for a just and compassionate society? Where do we look for answers to the most pressing issues of our day? How can we live together when there are such profound disagreements among us? Ask 10 people these questions and you may very well get 10 different answers.

I graciously but earnestly submit that Christian doctrine, ethics, and the resultant understanding of the human person have provided the metaphysical foundation for the ordering of a righteous and compassionate society.

Yes, I am aware that societies influenced by biblical Christianity haven't always got it right (slavery, Jim Crow laws, Manifest Destiny, and abortion are examples), but even here the biblical doctrine of the radical depravity of our human nature accounts for this. We have a sense of what is right, but we daily fail to do it. We are sinners in need of redemption. That is why the church must boldly proclaim the gospel and make disciples.

But what about those who are outside of the faith in our society? Well, even the unbelieving person benefits from a society filled with Christians living their faith and influencing culture.

Kristopher Pierce, Turlock

FROM PAGE 1C

EDITORIAL

crunched and analyzed by Brookings will be unveiled.

STANISLAUS DEEP DIVE COMING

A word of caution: It won't all be pretty. Some of this profile, this honest look in a mirror, will be downright disheartening.

It's no secret that our region suffers from chronic high unemployment, high obesity, low wages and low education. The Brookings report will put all that and much, much more into context, because you have to know where you stand if you want to start fixing something.

The grand plan should be ready by summer. It's called an investment agenda, because it will set priorities for spending the money to which we sudden-

ly have access, plus additional funding that will come our way as our region begins to rise.

"A couple months in, we're very excited, we're driving the ball down the field," said Dillon Olvera of Modesto's Beard Land Improvement Company. "It feels like success is just in front of us."

And yet it's natural to harbor reservations. This isn't the first time the brightest among us have looked around and wondered why we have under-achieved.

Remember the Stanislaus Countywide Visioning Project of the 1990s? Forward Modesto, another effort, did not gain much traction either, nor did the Blueprint process. The Modesto-based Great Valley Cen-

ter made excellent strides in focusing attention here, and lasted more than a decade, but eventually waned. In recent years, county-led Focus on Prevention has helped break down the silos that prevented various community stakeholders from collaborating.

"I don't see them as failed initiatives," Kaanon said, "because we learned from them all."

Perhaps the key lesson is recognizing the power of joining public and private sectors. The early stage of Stanislaus 2030 is doing that. It must continue if this initiative is to flourish where others faltered.

HOW TO CHANGE THE GAME

For this to work, players must see beyond short-term benefits to themselves and hold fast to the greater good of a broad-based, robust economy.

The vision must take us be-

yond our fertile fields while maximizing their potential.

It must provide more than lip service to workforce development. The vital economy we strive for requires that we educate and train the rising generation at a much higher level than we have, with specialized skills, so it's encouraging to see Modesto Junior College, Stanislaus State University and U.C. Merced on the ground level of Stanislaus 2030.

This effort must welcome scrutiny and accept accountability. The Bee will play a key role in that.

It must find ways to draw in all of our people, in all of our wonderful diversity.

It's a tall order, a big ask, a monumental challenge.

And it's about time. Stanislaus 2030 deserves a fighting chance to transform our region from something special into something spectacular.

FROM PAGE 1C

MARIJUANA

even death. One quarter of a teaspoon of carbofuran is enough to kill a 600-pound bear. Carbofuran's combustibility makes it even more dangerous in a hot fire, where it could be inhaled by firefighters.

Law enforcement agencies across California often receive reports from visitors and residents living near national forests about trespass grows. Yet both the U.S. Forest Service and Bureau of Land Management are woefully understaffed

to prevent or clean up after trespass operations.

In California's National Forests, only one officer is responsible for approximately every 250,000 acres, an area larger than the entire city of San Diego. And over the past year, public officials are reporting that trespass grows have increased to pre-legalization levels.

If we are going to protect California's public lands from the pollution and destruction from trespass grows, the feder-

al government must increase its prevention and reclamation efforts. This can only happen through providing our public agencies the resources they need to carry out the work and succeed.

Fortunately, a bipartisan group of Congress members is now working to increase investment in enforcement and clean-up efforts. In a recent budget vote by the House of Representatives, members voted to increase funding for the Forest Service to over \$4.14 billion, which is \$680 million more than in the previous year. That includes language acknowledging the trespass grow issue and mandating action. It

is critical for the U.S. Senate to affirm these increases and ensure that these funds are put toward preventing and cleaning up trespass operations.

With trespass grows steadily increasing, bold and swift action is needed to protect our land, water, and environment. The legacy of California's wildlands is at stake.

Megan Fiske is executive director of Jackson-based Foothill Conservancy, and Ryan Henson is policy director of Cannabis Removal on Public Lands Project/CalWild.

FROM PAGE 1C

EPLEY

videos, we choose to tell the children killed in Parkland, Fla.; in Stockton; in Santa Fe, N.M.; Rancho Tehama, Calif.; Roseburg, Ore.; and Columbine, Colo. — and countless more communities — that their lives were an acceptable sacrifice on the high altar of American selfishness.

In this year alone, there were at least 144 incidents of gunfire on school grounds, resulting in 28 deaths and 86 injuries. In 2020, there were 96 incidents and 24 deaths. Taking our children out of school for a global pandemic seems to be the only way we've found to slow down how many of them die at school. We owe them more than our apathy.

If you haven't seen Kluska's video, then I suggest you watch it. Hold that horror close to your heart — because those parents can no longer hold their own children close to theirs.

Maybe then the adults in America will begin to understand that there are hundreds of schools across this nation, full of students, who have first-hand experience with diving under their desks, hiding behind lockers, crying themselves to sleep every night, and gathering up enormous courage simply to step back inside a classroom.

Change in this country seems to come at the end of a camera lens, not a gun. So watch the videos. Look at the pictures. Observe the vigils and the candles and the tears. Anything less is tacit allowance of murder.

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