



Written by [Thomas Sowell](#) on May 14, 2014

The Height of Utopianism

A political battle that is shaping up in San Francisco has implications for other communities across the country.

The issue that will be on the June ballot is whether voter approval shall be required to change the height restrictions on buildings along the San Francisco waterfront. Like so many other political issues, this one is being debated in runaway rhetoric bearing no resemblance to reality.



Former San Francisco City Attorney Louise Renne, for example, says that “the people” own the waterfront and therefore should be “consulted.” Really? Can one of “the people,” who supposedly own the waterfront, decide that he wants to sell his share of it and pocket the money?

As for being “consulted,” how many of “the people” — who have lives to lead, careers to pursue and families to take care of — are going to study the economic and other complexities created by height restrictions?

What we are really talking about are little coteries of self-righteous busybodies, who have been elected by nobody, wrapping themselves in the mantle of “the people,” in order to oppose elected officials, who have been elected precisely in order to give such issues the professional attention they deserve, in a system of representative government.

Height restrictions have serious economic implications that are not immediately obvious to those who do not look beyond rhetoric about “saving” this or “preserving” that.

In a place with very high land prices, such as San Francisco, the difference between building a ten-story apartment building and being restricted to building a five-story apartment building can be a big difference in what rent will have to be charged, when there are only half as many renters to cover the costs of the land.

When a city cannot expand upward, its growing population must expand outward. That means far more commuter traffic, from ever greater distances, to get to work in the city.

Anyone who has seen the huge amount of traffic clogging the bridges into San Francisco, as early as 6 o’clock in the morning, will understand that such repercussions exact a price that goes beyond money to time lost in traffic and lives lost in traffic.

None of these hidden costs of height restrictions is likely to be noticed, much less weighed, by those who speak or hear self-indulgent rhetoric about how the waterfront is a “treasure” that needs “careful and attentive stewardship” by the voters, as a *San Francisco Examiner* editorial put it.

And just how many of those voters — “the people” with jobs, homes and families to look after — are going to have time to carry out this “careful and attentive stewardship”? Does anyone seriously believe that most people have time to be poring over maps, reports and statistics about the San Francisco waterfront?

Is not the whole point of representative government that you cannot run a city, much less a state or a



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nation, as if you were having “town meeting democracy” in some little New England village, where virtually everybody knows everything that is important to that village?

Nothing is easier than to rhapsodize about the waterfront as “a public resource beyond compare.” But, however impressive the San Francisco waterfront may be, no resource is “beyond compare.”

Comparing — weighing one thing against another — is what rational decision-making is all about. Exempting what some segment of the population wants from the process of weighing alternatives is what rhetoric-driven political stampedes are all about.

Ms. Renne’s assertion that those who own the waterfront should be the ones to make decisions about it is an argument for a policy the opposite of what she advocates.

Constitutionally protected property rights, which have been seriously eroded by judicial “interpretation,” were meant to keep many decisions out of the political arena.

It is not that individual waterfront property owners will get together to make such decisions. Instead, market processes can make property owners “an offer they can’t refuse,” based on how much other people want their property, in order to build whatever there is a real demand for by others. And we will be spared rhetorical flourishes.

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