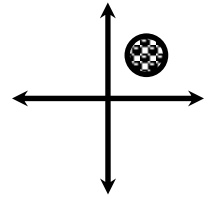


THE GOOD LIFE

Upper Right quadrant combination:

Horizontal—*Positive External Influences*

Vertical—*Improving Resources*



Who knew? Almost no one back in 2003. Back then, “Northern California” meant the San Francisco Bay Area to most people. “The Good Life” tells the story of a North Valley built on consensus that was able to make long term plans for the betterment of the entire region.

“I JUST LIKE THE PACE UP HERE”

On the morning of May 22, 2025, Miriam Turner, a 42-year old real estate agent, checked her teeth in a window reflection on the Red Bluff split level, 3 bedroom, 3 bath she was showing that morning. (“IMMACULATE, PERFECT FOR RETIREMENT” was how she listed it). While Miriam knew she was good saleswoman, she had to wonder if there was anything else that could explain her amazing success over the past 3 years?

Even the oldtimers in the office kept saying the change in home sales seemed less like a bubble and more like a wholesale shift in the market. The closest answer she could figure was something a buyer had said at a closing two weeks earlier: “I just like the pace up here, not too urban, not too suburban, but I don’t feel like I’m in the sticks either.”

A real estate columnist in the San Francisco Chronicle’s even styled the North Valley as “The Goldilocks Market” of 2025. Not too hot. Not too cold. Just right.

Sure, “location, location, location” still mattered, Miriam thought. But the balance that had been found between the arts and the sciences, work and play, body and mind, old and young, male and female. . . the balance — that’s what made for the good life, and that’s what she emphasized to prospective buyers.

BALANCE

Just then, she heard the familiar hum of a hydrogen fuel cell vehicle pulling up the driveway. Looking out the window, she saw a silver Ford Celera SUV carrying a middle-aged couple come to a stop.

Joseph Barrett and his wife were lawyers from Sacramento looking for a new home away from the constant noise and congestion of the state capital. As she showed them the sunroom upstairs, she broke away from her pitch and decided to indulge her curiosity. “John, I have to ask, how did you come across Red Bluff, of all places?”

The 60-year old attorney, dressed in frayed khakis and a faded green button down shirt smiled slowly. “Way too many depositions.”

Apparently, John had been part of a small wave of lawyers called up to participate in the hundreds of planning meetings (sometimes extending into the late night) that precipitated the North Valley's stunning success. In his day, he had represented, to limited success, the interests of those who resisted the nascent movement towards regional approaches to selected problems.

Oh yes, the meetings. Between business leaders and elected officials, of course, but also between parents and teachers, between transportation planners and environmentalists, between representatives of different ethnic groups, between city planners and real estate developers (Miriam even recalled attending a few of the real estate forums), between air quality monitors and industrialists, between experts on water and agricultural researchers.

However, in 2005, researchers at a North Valley think tank pushed local interests to see how careful planning and coordination could produce positive sum solutions. We could have economic development and open spaces too; we could move more workers and have clean air too; we could diversify the Valley's economy and preserve agriculture as well.

No get rich quick schemes or overnight successes were promoted. Rather, a slow build toward a "truly new economy" that was based on values very different from the bubble economy built on silicon and venture capital.

For Joseph and his wife, the North Valley offered amenities for the kind of life they wanted to live: Hiking, white-water rafting, access to the mountains,

the arts, good schools, and a vibrant community life.

Miriam could see the Barretts' would fit in well. Time and again she had seen how the region had benefited from the cadre of skilled, experienced, and even wise citizens who came to retire only to turn renewed energies toward educating the young, attending meetings, and working as volunteers on any number of projects on behalf of the community.

Case in point was her own dad. He had been co-chairman of the citizen's committee that helped Chico and Butte Counties establish a new joint planning development standards protocol to preserve open space between city and countryside over the next 20 years.

SEIZING OPPORTUNITIES

Events throughout the world also helped to create improved conditions. But it was the individuals, the people of the North Valley, who did a better job than anywhere else at taking advantage of the opportunities.

China's continued growth, the lowering of its trade barriers and a Pacific Rim rebound meant more exports from the U.S., including lots of rice from the North Valley which found welcome markets. Nationally, the federal government approved an overhaul to the Environmental Protection Agency and Endangered Species Act that enabled green development that save the environment and allowed a profit.

No major terrorist attacks followed the World Trade Center events of 2001. So, when the nation's and the world's

economy climbed out of the recession after the technology crash of 2000-2004, the North Valley was poised for success. The experts said “The Long Boom” has resumed the course it had been on since 1980 and California’s economy rose with the tide.

REAPING THE HARVEST

By the second decade of the century the people of the North Valley were starting to reap the harvest they had patiently sown in all those meetings during the previous decade. The “Ring Transportation Corridor” that was part of the Chico General Plan was finally complete. The ribbon cutting ceremony celebrated no less than twelve new public art projects. Riders on the ring road included growing numbers of employees at a software company started by an ex-Sun Microsystems executive.

Jobs, of course, were an issue, and not just any jobs. For too long the North Valley, like the rest of the Central Valley, had advertised low cost labor to prospective employers, mainly on the model of migrant workers in agriculture. And there was little likelihood that the region could leapfrog straight from an agricultural economy to a high-tech, high wage economy.

Part of the planning in the first decade laid out a step-by-step progression from specialty agriculture through warehousing and light manufacturing and on up to the kinds of jobs the creative class would embrace. And the poor were still with us. In-migration from the south, and a continued need for agricultural labor left thousands at the bottom of the pyramid even as its top was reaching higher and wider.

Typical of the North State’s talent for turning old problems into new solutions was the transition from the burning of rice fields to the use of rice straw in a new process for paper manufacturing — which also eased the demand on timber for paper. Later in the period, when fuel cell technology was providing clean energy with less air pollution, some scientists at a research lab in Red Bluff worked out a process for extracting hydrogen from rice straw to feed the fuel cells. On the way up the value-adding technology ladder however, the first step toward cleaning the air was to reduce commuting distances.

From Shasta to Oroville and towns in between, people created communities that balanced home life with work without requiring long commutes that wasted time and dirtied the air. Air quality had been a big issue in guiding the transportation plan laid down in 2005 and by 2015 the results were as visible as the mountains. Shasta and the Sierra had been out more days in 2020 than back in 2010.

WATER AND TECHNOLOGY

Seen as a source of water by the thirsty south, the northern counties had a major stake in the efficient management of water. Here, a regional perspective promoted.

Back at the beginning of the century, Butte County had the greatest number of organic farms and Kern County had the highest volume of organic produce. A coalition of farmers from these two counties pooled their experience to lead other farmers throughout the Central Valley toward practices that reduced the

use of herbicides and pesticides, increased the amount of precision irrigation, preserved the quality of the groundwater, and improved the quality of runoff into the Sacramento Delta. By the 2020s, salmon were spawning in the Sacramento in record numbers and local anglers caught trophy salmon in Clear Creek.

As for water quantity and availability throughout the state, it was necessary to achieve balance between efficient use, fair allocation and smart conservation. Biotechnology produced strains of crops that called for less water. Investments in storage, transport, and desalination produced more usable water.

But in dry years, conservation was still necessary and the question of what counted as fair allocation became acute. Sacramento was the place where comprehensive, statewide water policy had to be set. In order to keep from getting sucked dry by the rest of the state, the North Valley had to rely on fearless public officials to represent their interests.

WILL SUCCESS BREED FAILURE?

As word spread about the Good Life in the real northern California, it attracted the very best doctors, nurses and teachers. This made Miriam's job selling homes easier than ever.

School performance in Redding and Chico in 2025 was the best in the state, even with the ever-recurring influx of students for whom English was a second language.

With all of good things being said about the North Valley, some got nervous. Growth looked like it might become a real problem. "Nothing feeds failure like success" they said. But the North Valley had learned how to husband scarce resources, how to take a regional perspective, how to plan, and how to reach agreements on contentious issues. They were not about to let success turn into failure - and they did so without relying on heavy-handed regulation. They simply figured it out and got the job done.

As one success built on another, the individual citizens of the North Valley found that the Good Life was possible. So they chose to envision it, agree upon it, create it, and live it.

WHAT DOES "THE GOOD LIFE" MEAN?

- There is a need for a prototype before developers can make the leap in imagination for urban development
- Identify a forum that can bring the region together by addressing equity issue between local areas
- Overcome old grievances that can divide communities within the region
- A balance can be found between jobs and the environment
- Need to overcome competitiveness and selfishness
- Need to address the water challenge (supply and cost)
- Need to address challenge of high cost of energy
- Need to address affordable housing challenge in the face of in-migration (especially of the more affluent)
- Change can be good
- Fostering civic engagement among diverse groups is critical
- Emergence of creative new regional solutions to water distribution (e.g., watershed-based collaboration)

SOME EARLY INDICATORS OF "THE GOOD LIFE" TO LOOK OUT FOR:

- Native Americans are better integrated into communities
- An economic summit for the region is held to develop consensus and strategy
- Creation of an I-5 tech center
- "Survival Center" that teaches life/job skills to all
- Significant increases in sales tax revenues throughout the area
- Increase in voter participation
- "Unity Day" brings together different racial/ethnic groups
- Chico and Butte County agree on regional planning board
- Unemployment rate matches state level (instead of being higher)
- Local economy remains strong even during national down cycle, agriculture is healthy
- Enrollment in local higher education institutions increases
- Health care improves in rural areas
- Meth labs cease to exist
- Redding develops booming tourism economy

STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR "THE GOOD LIFE"

If a significant number of these early indicators show up in the news, then the North Valley Region would be wise to implement at least some of the following strategic options.

- Create a leadership development and training program for the North Valley to build skills, outcomes, relationships
- Develop a regional water plan/coalition involving diverse stakeholders to represent regions interest to state and federal agencies
- Develop new initiative to improve parenting and life skills and raise kids with higher aspirations
- Improve regional land use and transportation planning between population centers
- Support a voter participation initiative led by regional youth (“The Rebel Alliance”)
- Raise awareness of regional issues
- Plan for economic diversification and environmental protection
- Improve the integration of schools with their communities (e.g., schools as community centers)
- Develop mentorship programs on civic participation and leadership development for youth
- Understand how decisions made today shape the region in 2025
- Make connections between your own choices and options and the region