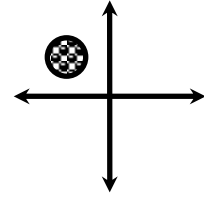


## TOXIC GOLD



Upper left quadrant combination:

Horizontal—*Negative External Influences*

Vertical—*Improving Social Conditions*

*“Toxic Gold” describes a Valley that captured the market of dealing with social and material waste. The economic development strategy ‘worked’, but the region also paid a price.*

### A GOOD IDEA?

“It seemed like a good idea at the time,” said Arthur as he cut into his short stack of buttermilk pancakes at a Corcoran coffee shop. “Taking in the wastes of the Bay Area and Los Angeles. The pay was good, and it provided employment. The so-called experts said we needed to ‘diversify our economy.’ ‘Relying on agriculture alone’ would make us vulnerable.

“But, let me tell you something”, the old man continued while pointing a fork with a piece of bacon stuck between its tines, “Dumps and prisons are not all that diverse. Waste is waste. Just try ‘adding value’ to sludge. Might as well try to rehabilitate a serial rapist.” “The thing was, we had the space and they didn’t. So when the landfills in Southern California topped out and they started looking around for new sites, our backyards looked a lot emptier than theirs. And God knows we needed the money. We actually fought over who would be ‘lucky’ enough to store hazardous wastes.”

“I don’t know what you’re complaining about Granddad, it worked”, responded Ned, Arthur’s 28-year old grandson, while rolling his eyes. “We wanted the state tax dollars to build schools and housing and hospitals for our sick folks. It all made a lot of sense.”

“Well, it seemed to make sense—if you went back to the last century when the prison industry started to boom out here in the valley. ‘Bring us your criminals,’ we said to the cities on the coast. ‘We will house them. We’ll keep them away from your daughters and your cars and your cash. We will look after them, and we will gain tax revenues and jobs and business for our cement factories in the process.’

“So we built big prisons in Madera, Corcoran, Delano, Avenal and Wasco, not to speak of Stockton, Tracy, Atwater, and Coalinga. And once we saw what a good business that was, it seemed to make sense to leap on the bid that Intel put out for storing its toxic wastes.”

### WHAT’S THE BIG DEAL?

Ned finally interrupted his grandfather’s lecture, “Wait a minute Grandpa, Kings County got that contract and 250 jobs in the bargain. Then Lawrence Livermore Labs got approval for a federal grant for a spent plutonium facility, and after that, Intel sweetened its offer with a pledge to fund a research campus near UC Merced. That kicked off its own little building boom: more houses, more jobs, all in the service of building a ‘center of excellence’ around waste management and recycling.”

Arthur shook his head and smiled sadly.

“Yeah, well . . . the words sounded nice—much nicer than the stuff they were actually talking about. But ‘recycling’ and ‘sustainability’ were words that my generation was learning from kids like you. You brought them home from school, and got us to sort our whiskey bottles and beer cans from the rest of the garbage.”

“Hey, what’s the big deal. This is the just the Valley. Everywhere can’t be pretty like Monterey, you know,” said Ned as he sipped his coffee. “Anyway, if recycling could work for aluminum cans, why not for ex-cons and toxic waste?”

“Let me ask you something College Boy. How many of your friends do you know that grow up wanting to be prison guards? Where’s the career ladder? ‘Stay around here, sonny, and, if you’re lucky, maybe you’ll end up as the top dog, the warden.’ What a joke. Same thing with hazardous waste. Devote your life to taking care of them and sooner or later the rot leaks into your soul.”

“But we did grow souls with all that money,” Ned replied. “We built schools and colleges and hospitals with the money that came from the prisons and the waste dumps and all the jobs and housing that went around them. Those prison guards got a damn fine income once their lobby went to work in Sacramento.”

*If you thought of prisoners as a new sort of crop, drought-resistant and growing incrementally, the future of California seemed bright. In the early 1970s, fourteen out of a hundred convicted felons were sentenced to a prison term. The current ratio was thirty-five out of a hundred. Drugs were an excellent fertilizer, and the crop tended to reseed itself. A high rate of recidivism was guaranteed. No wonder, then, that prisons were known as “gray gold.” . . . prisoners could be counted as residents of the town or city where the institution was located. By kiting its population with bad guys, Avenal had set itself up for an annual bonus of several hundred thousand dollars from various state agencies, earning funds that it would not have been eligible for otherwise...*

*A sickness of the soul was the chief complaint at Corcoran, and those who suffered from it were supposed to be just as invisible as AIDS patients or the victims of terminal cancer. We had given up on trying to heal the soul’s complaint. Correctional officers marched through the waiting room at intervals, going at a military clip. Their combat boots rapped against the clean, unscuffed surface of the glossily waxed floors. They were dressed like commandos in green camouflage uniforms. They looked rugged, solid, and devoid of all sympathy, particularly the younger ones, who seemed years away from making a compassionate gesture.*

- Bill Barich, “Prison Valley” in *Highway 99*

“But then some of those dumps started leaking.” Art replied. We noticed peculiar pockets of cancer. People started joking that the Valley might glow in the dark, but it was the glow of money.”

“Right,” said Ned. “That’s what I mean. Unemployment was way down from what it had been. There was money in dumps, and there was even more money in clean-ups from the mistakes.”

“Sure. Lawyers got rich on class action suits. Plaintiffs got rich when they won the suits. But what are you going to do with the money when your friends are dying and your real estate values are dropping and your kids are leaving home because they can’t stand the stench?”

“Waste management isn’t what it used to be, Granddad. It’s a lot cleaner now, more scientific. We really can recycle minerals by mining and refining the landfills. This is what I’ve been learning about over at UC Merced.”

### **“GET OUT, KID”**

“Get out, kid. Garbage is a dirty business, no matter how green the money. No wonder organized crime cornered the east coast on garbage back in the 50s. Ashes to ashes, dust to dust, and garbage to garbage. I don’t care how clean and scientific they make it sound over at that ‘center of excellence’ at the university. Major in managing a dump, for human or hazardous wastes, and all you’ll be is a high-class garbage man. And it will rot your soul. Take your education and your degree and get out of this place. There may be work here. But it’s not a good life.”

“Granddad, I like the Valley. It may not be pretty but it pays OK. So I think you’re

going to have a hard time getting me to leave.”

“Well then find some better way to make a living. They say there’s money in cows, in dairy farming.”

“So you want to see me shoveling cow pies instead of toxic wastes?”

“I’ve heard that the warehousing business is doing just fine up north—warehousing and trucking.”

“And what are we going to do with all the traffic and the truck exhaust?” asked Ned.

“Well, you can figure that one out over at that fancy-schmancy ‘center of excellence’ of yours, the one where they’re teaching you how to handle toxins and poisons and all that stuff.”

“Storing toxic wastes may sound like a dirty job to you, but somebody’s got to do it. To me it sounds more like it’s cleaning up the dirt. And the money makes for a lot better life than what I could support in LA, besides,” Ned smirked, “who’s going to stay around to recycle you and your crusty old bones?”

“Nice one,” Art snorted.

## **WHAT DOES TOXIC GOLD MEAN?**

- Economic decisions require tradeoffs
- A regional image is created in many ways
- Ensure that toxic wastes don't pose health threats through adequate regulation
- Threat of future decline of waste: Is an economy built on waste truly sustainable?
- Highways clogged with trucks require congestion management
- There is a need to fund alternative employment that pays decent wages for people without college degrees
- Short-term benefits must be balanced against long-term results
- Individuals and local decisions lead to regional results
- Image and quality of life attract or repel investments

## **SOME POSSIBLE EARLY INDICATORS OF "TOXIC GOLD" TO LOOK OUT FOR:**

- More prisons being built in the Valley
- More hazardous waste dumps proposed or sited in the Valley
- Federal government looks to the Valley as a storage facility
- Sludge and biosolids come into the region
- Increase of political influence of urban areas in the Capitol
- Increasing population pressure along California coast
- Growth of 'Not in My Backyard' (NIMBY) movements in Bay Area and Los Angeles
  
- Increased volume of freight to and from coastal metropolitan areas, no regional integration for bad air impacts
- Growing cost of land in Southern California—shrinking availability
- Valley zoning decisions enable distribution and other uses
- More land subsidence
- No transit alternatives in the Valley

*If a significant number of these early indicators show up in the news, then the citizens of the San Joaquin Valley would be wise to implement at least some of the following strategic options:*

## **STRATEGIC OPTIONS FOR "TOXIC GOLD"**

- Create regional coalition to: 1) Increase political clout of region; 2) Force mitigation and compensation for negative spillovers; 3) Create alignment around shared vision for the future
- Create public—and private—university partnerships to tap federal funds to create needs assessment study on Valley toxic waste challenges and health impacts
- Ensure that tax and fee systems require that income from hazardous wastes and other facilities stay in the Valley (as much as possible)

- Feasibility study to consider shifting distribution and logistics traffic from trucks/freeway to rail-freight system
- Create external support system for communities impacted by prisons (e.g., social services for families of prisoners, guards, etc.)
- Limit the number of prisons per capita in any single region of the state
- Encourage scientific studies on the use of waste by-products that are efficient and eco-friendly. Become the R&D center for new processes and technologies
- Monitor best practices in waste management globally—implement and build on them
- Insist on full enforcement of environmental health regulations, especially for air and water quality
- Become a global leader in recycling technology
- Recognize the impact of individual choices
- Value the Valley