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## **Don't end anti-blight program; reform it**

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**By BOB BUSTER**

Gov. Brown's call to eliminate funding for redevelopment agencies should not be heard as a death knell for local governments' efforts to revitalize their communities.

Rather, local leaders should transform the governor's debate on redevelopment to gain reform of an arcane, distrusted process that saps revenue needed for crucial community services.

This budget year, for example, plummeting property- and sales-tax revenues forced Riverside County to make severe cuts in basic services.

Health services, fire protection and sheriff's patrols have gone on the chopping block while large pots of redevelopment money remain locked by rigid state regulations that forbid use of the money for basic services like police protection.

Allowing distressed local governments to open the lockbox during economic crises would help reduce cuts in essential local services. Only cities and counties, such as Riverside County, that have suffered high [unemployment](#) and steep declines in property and sales taxes would qualify.

Redevelopment has been a favored economic catalyst by local governments since 1978, when Californians adopted Prop. 13 and restricted annual property-tax increases to no more than 2 percent annually. Some local governments misused their authority. Thriving neighborhoods and viable businesses were razed under the pretense of "blight." Shopping centers, auto malls and other big retail-tax generators replaced them to help local government balance budgets.

But those abuses are the exception.

Redevelopment offers impoverished communities an economic foothold they otherwise would not have, particularly across our region. In California, Riverside County has among the lowest per capita property taxes and reimbursement for state-mandated health services. Neither keeps up with our rapid growth.

Redevelopment helps compensate for historically low revenues in Riverside County, which the state legislative analyst's office has noted seem to be grossly insufficient when contrasted to the needs of our population.

California must reform redevelopment, not throw out an important economic instrument. If Gov. Brown eliminates funding for redevelopment, he has an obligation to ensure that most of the revenue agencies have generated remains in local hands. Reforms should:

Allow voters to decide whether more redevelopment bonds are issued because taxes are raised -- or basic services reduced - to make up for redevelopment encumbrances.

Place a moratorium on new or expanded redevelopment project areas until tougher standards of blight are set.

Allow bonds to be issued only for roads, flood-control and drainage systems, sewers, fire stations and essential improvements that attract private development and investment.

Give the state a greater say in overseeing how funds are spent since the state makes up for schools' tax losses to city and county redevelopment agencies.

Terminate the 20 percent revenue share that redevelopment agencies are required to set aside for low-income housing.

Ten percent of the affordable housing set-aside should go to the state to reduce cuts in other services for low-income residents. Local governments could retain half to create housing opportunities for seniors, veterans and families.

To pay for services funded by local and state taxes, we must restructure redevelopment rules and the pay for public employees, reform public pension programs and revise state spending regulations.

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