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# NEBA News

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*NORTH EAST BERKELEY ASSOCIATION*

*Fall 2017*

★★★★★ *EXTRA EDITION* ★★★★★

## President's Message

***NEBA wants you! Join us!***

The fall 2017 issue of the *NEBA News* is shorter than usual due to postage and printing costs beyond our means. This extra online edition contains articles that we were not able to print. It is available on our website. Members who do not use the internet can drop us a note, we will mail printed copies. You get news and opinions here that you will not get anywhere else! \*\*\* Members, thank you for your support! \*\*\*

**Sharon Eige**

## Opinion on Public Works Staff by John Hitchen

Recently Berkeley's Public Works Department has had a lot of staff changes, but few seem to have a long-term perspective on the fiscal health of the city.

I do not have a solution to this problem, and it is not due to a conspiracy, but simply to the dynamics of Region-wide salaries and pension benefit packages which allow employees to carry their Calpers retirement credits anywhere in the state.

The people being hired are well qualified, but they are ready to move to another municipality if there are any issues in their department.

A good long-term goal is to take advantage of Berkeley's reputation as a reliably progressive city so that idealistic and motivated professionals will stay for many years and work hard to meet Berkeley's ambitious goals. Berkeley is perceived by some as a place to rack up a few more years of Calpers Retirement Credits, but not necessarily as a place to become a strong advocate for local values and priorities.

Just my opinion

## Berkeley Public Library is in a Financial Death Spiral

**Fewer Books pay for Employees' Higher Salaries** by Isabelle Gaston, PhD

In 2016, personnel costs were \$12.9 million; this year, they are \$14.5 million – an increase of >\$1.5 million over 2 years. The library's surplus in 2016 was \$1.4 million; the deficit this year is \$1.2 million – a loss of \$2.6 million. This loss is despite a 5.37% increase in library tax last year.

Where is the money going?

- Over the next 4 years, there will be NO increases to library materials or non-personnel.
- Over the next 4 years, salaries and benefits will increase by over \$2 million.

Will Berkeley's Board of Library Trustees (BOLT), including Councilmember Hahn who sits on the board, continue this trend of prioritizing employees over books? Taxpayers deserve answers.

<https://www.cityofberkeley.info/uploadedFiles/Manager/Budget/FY%202018%20%20FY%202019%20Proposed%20Budget%20Book.pdf> See page 99

## Four Examples of Magical Thinking in Berkeley Politics by Robert Krumme

Magical thinking – i.e. the invocation of facts, propositions, or arguments that are so essentially unmoored from truth or logic that they can best be described as fabulous (as in fable) or magical – seems ubiquitous in Berkeley policy discussions these days. Of course, most people are familiar with magical thinking by children – especially at play where it can actually be a sign of progressing development. The success of the Peter Pan fable was not all among children, however. When adults persist in the magical thinking – the psychological term being Peter Pan syndrome perhaps – then it becomes destructive. But magical thinking can only really be a problem for political discussion in the presence of another, more sinister, type of flaw in the civic dialog. This is the common knowledge problem – an idea borrowed from mathematical game theory.

Game theory is the branch of economics that studies mathematical models of decision making. Before you sniff at such an abstraction as totally useless in the real world (perhaps itself an example of magical thinking), you should consider that, at the highest levels of military, economic, financial, and diplomatic policy making, game theory is now the dominant tool for decision making. So much so that a lot of game theory terminology has leaked into everyday political discussion e.g. zero-sum and positive sum games; prisoner's dilemma game; competition versus cooperation games; etc. Yes, even Nash equilibrium from the movie "A Beautiful Mind". While many of these concepts are misunderstood and thus misapplied in political discussion, on the whole these game theoretic concepts help with the policy debate. Unfortunately, there is one game theory concept that is not widely appreciated by the public and yet is key to explaining what has gone wrong with our political process in Berkeley and nationally as well. This is the so-called Common Knowledge (CK) Problem.

The CK problem refers to a peculiar effect of policy choices which occur when the following conditions apply to the public's (game-player's) view of reality (context in which the game is played). These conditions are:

- Everyone knows that proposition A is true. For example, everyone knows that poverty exclusively causes crime.
- Everyone knows that everyone else knows that A is true.

Now actually this is a grossly simplified statement of the common knowledge conditions but it will serve to explain the problems that arise when a false common knowledge is established. Here I should note as an aside that as a practical matter all states of common knowledge are false and thus problematic.

So, what happens when a common knowledge condition arises? The result is that the game, or in this case, the debate shuts down. Or in technical terms the game goes to a static equilibrium determined by the common knowledge. There is no longer any reason to invest in policies to reduce crime since the only thing that can work is to eliminate poverty (or whatever).

How does this common knowledge problem relate to Magical Thinking? Here is how. In general MT cannot sustain itself in the absence of CK conditions. If it is common knowledge that poverty causes crime then you would be a fool to even raise the idea of investing in, say, better policing. This is true not just because everyone knows that poverty alone causes crime but more importantly because you know that everyone else believes this. So, if you speak up about more policing as a better approach, you will be politically crushed. As an aside, I should mention that for the totalitarian former East European countries with which I am a little familiar, it was not a case of being politically crushed. Rather it was a case of being literally crushed. Increasingly, this seems like it may become the case for Berkeley as well.

And here you have the explanation of why the political debate across Berkeley and nationally has become so sterile and polarized. For each potential player in the debate, the highest payoff strategy is not to invest in logic or factual argument but rather to invest in establishing a common knowledge that can be exploited to force the debate to an end. Control the common understanding and victory is yours.

Here are some examples of cases in Berkeley where an accepted common knowledge has been established with the result that the policy debate consists of mostly Magical Thinking:

- Unfunded pension liabilities – The core common knowledge here is that pension obligations are both morally and more importantly legally inviolate. That is, pensions are constitutionally protected obligations and were freely negotiated with the City and thus also morally protected as well. The point here is not to debate the truth of this “knowledge” but rather to note that it is not even permitted to safely debate that “truth”.
- Housing crisis is caused by insufficient public expenditure – This common “knowledge” is so deeply embedded in Berkeley that you can contradict only at the expense of expulsion from polite society.
- Homelessness crisis can be fixed by appropriate public expenditure alone – Again, contradiction of this dogma (another name for common knowledge) leads to social ostracism. Just view the debate in Berkeleysides over the suggestion that moral hazard suggests that public expenditures actually can aggravate the problem of homelessness.
- The City is an effective and efficient and prudent agency to control infrastructure investment and should be trusted with massive bond funding without independent oversight.

Of course, the list of CK problems in Berkeley is actually coextensive with the list of public policy issues in Berkeley but I am stopping here because it is common knowledge that I am no idiot.

### **Thinking Outside the Box about our Post-Disaster Food Supply by Sharon Eige**

I propose that the invasive bullfrogs in Lake Anza be considered as a potential backup food source in case of a prolonged post-disaster food shortage. The idea of catching and eating a bullfrog does seem gross, to me and to everyone I know, and I am not sure if I ever would do that, but I have read that some people really like to eat them. You never know. Each of us would need to make a personal decision if the choice is eat a bullfrog or starve. And the bullfrogs are very destructive to native species, they eat everything that is smaller than their mouths, they reproduce rapidly, and they grow large in size. And they are not welcome. And they are edible. I'm not the only one thinking about this. PBS talked about it: "Want to help control invasive species? Eat a bullfrog."

<http://www.pbs.org/newshour/updates/want-to-help-control-invasive-species-eat-a-bullfrog/>

As part of my disaster planning, I have been looking for foods with a reasonable shelf life. For the most part, canned goods seem to be the primary source of protein that can work, but canned foods are flawed, and anyway, the canned food supply could run out over time even if we stockpile more than we expect to need.

I know that the most likely case is that everything that we need would become available after a few days, a couple of weeks at the most, but maybe not. As we see in Puerto Rico, things can possibly go badly wrong. We could see many large landslides in the hills, for example, making transportation impossible and repair very slow. With massive destruction along the Hayward Fault, perhaps even simultaneously with another disaster, things might not go nearly as well as expected here.

Thus, the thoughts about the bullfrogs. Normally, one would absolutely never think of catching food in a park, but if lives were to depend on it, then what are the issues? Do the bullfrogs pose any health risk for example?

I see that one method of catching bullfrogs is to shoot them at night with a small gun. If desperate Berkeleyans were tromping around Lake Anza shooting guns at hopping bullfrogs in the dark, this might not be good. Perhaps an East Bay Regional Parks district employee might be trained and designated as the official bullfrog catcher.

What are other considerations and other possible local food sources? Could we invite Amazon to send an army of drones to drop ship food to every one of us who can manage to stay in our homes, but who cannot get out for food? Anything we want to count on later should probably be planned in advance to some degree. Food for thought.

North East Berkeley Association  
P.O. Box 7477, Landscape Station  
Berkeley, CA 94707

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**North East Berkeley Association (NEBA) is a nonpartisan community organization whose mission is to inform, educate, and advocate for the interests of Berkeley residents of local electoral Districts 5 and 6 (roughly coincident with the 94707 and 94708 zip codes). Civic issues of particular interest and concern include municipal fiscal responsibility, local taxes and fees, public safety, public education, and basic neighborhood services. NEBA is informed and guided in its mission by the single-family zoning and homeowner status of most of NEBA residents. NEBA does not support or oppose any political candidates or parties. However, NEBA does hold candidate and issue forums, thereby stimulating interest and discussion. On occasion, NEBA will offer analysis, opinion, and a recommended position on important local issues. To accomplish its mission, NEBA publishes a newsletter and holds community meetings. Its Board of Directors usually meets monthly and Board subcommittees more often as needed.**