



AS DUBAI GOES, SO GOES THE WORLD

For those of us who have lived through the on-going Northern California growth wars, the simple act of building civic infrastructure for the benefit of all sometimes has the feel of environmental and political waterboarding.

Whether it's a 2,000-foot extension of the runway at Sonoma County Airport, a third lane on Highway 101, a dam on the Eel River, a nuclear power plant on the Bodega Headlands, or a train from Cloverdale to Larkspur, the arguments are always loud and fractious. Consequently many public projects either hit a dead-end or, if the stars align, take 20 years to fulfill, costing millions more than the earliest projections.

To gain a larger perspective on the rise of the Third World and how our country's virtuous environmental values are being trampled by rampant global growth and massive oil-based energy consumption, I suggest a trip to Dubai, a major city and state that is part of a Federation called the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Located just a stone's throw from the extremism hotbeds of Iran, Pakistan, Saudi Arabia, Oman and Yemen, this Persian Gulf city of two million people is run as, some might say, a benevolent dictatorship (they prefer to call it a Constitutional Monarchy). The Ruler's focused vision has turned Dubai into something of a Las Vegas, Disneyland and New York City mash-up, literally overnight.

There is none of the sentimentalism that we Northern Californians have for our coastline, our trees or quality of life. In Dubai, it's full steam ahead with hundreds of uniquely designed high-rise offices under construction, a handful of six-lane freeways clogged with rush hour traffic, and several other unfinished public works projects rising from the desert sands. Everybody drives a car (mostly Toyota, Lexus, Bentley, Range Rover and Ferrari) because gas is only 29 cents a gallon.

The oil- and natural gas-rich land, headed by His Highness Sheikh Mohammed bin Rashid Al Maktoum, is giving American capitalism a run for its money, or to put it more exactly, a run with *our* oil money, what with prices soaring over \$100 per barrel and gas nearing \$4 per gallon.



Hoping to become the Switzerland/Hong Kong/Singapore (fill in the blank) of the Middle East, Dubai may be America's best hope in the battle against radical Islam. A trip through the Emirates Mall clearly shows a melting pot that includes Americans, Asians, Russians, Indonesians, Indians, Pakistanis, as well as secular and traditional Arabs, all in a rush to purchase the latest in fashion and technology.

The locals love to tell the story that of the entire world's construction going on at this very moment, more than half of it can be attributed to Dubai. I tend to agree, judging by the number of construction cranes on the horizon. Stories about possible steel and cement shortages are played prominently on the front-page of the daily *Gulf News*, the main city paper printed in English and packed with full-page color real estate and office space ads.

Dubai is now home to the world's tallest man-made structure (the Burj Dubai), the richest horse race, the richest Formula One race, and the world's largest entertainment complex—Dubailand—which will include a Universal Studios tour and Six Flags Amusement Park, but oddly no Disneyland.

Dubai also has the world's largest shopping mall, the most seawater desalinization plants and several man-made islands, one in the shape of a palm tree, and several islands in the shape of the global continents. These islands are so large that the space shuttle astronauts have taken note.

On those 100-degree days (which is pretty much year-round), you can snowplow down Ski Dubai, an indoor mountain complete with a ski lift, snow and a carbon footprint that eats all of Sonoma County's energy savings by noon.

A new elevated train that runs from the world's largest airport terminal will effortlessly move arriving tourists who have flown non-stop from Atlanta, Los Angeles, Toronto, Newark, New York, and Houston, to its multiple financial city centers, many shopping malls, and dozens of chic beach resorts, most of which feature Napa and Sonoma County wines. The entire two-track train system was built in a year and a half and is expected to be operating this summer.

Though it sounds like an energy and environmental disaster in the making, all is not lost in this Middle Eastern version of Shangri-la. The UAE is building a wind and solar energy program. And, in an interesting twist, the country announced it is planning to develop several small, new-generation nuclear power plants over the next two years.



Unlike America, Sheik Mohammed understands that his blossoming Arabian Desert city must prepare for a future without oil.

###

Written: 5/08

Published: *Santa Rosa Press Democrat*