

COMMENTARY

Yay for Modern 'Telephone Booth'

One interesting startup in the Valley area is Cubicall. As you can see in the article on page 4 of this issue, the Van Nuys company makes kind of modern-day telephone booths that are installed in workplaces so employees can get a few moments of solitude. And who doesn't want to retreat to a quiet space to make a call or just focus for a few distraction-free minutes?

The popularity of creative or open-concept office space gave birth to this market niche.

If you visit many companies, you know that private offices are nearly a relic. Also cleared out of workplaces are cubicles, which we used to deride as "giraffe boxes." (Offices that had many were "cube farms.") Now even they seem a bit decadent for the ample amount of personal space they afforded.

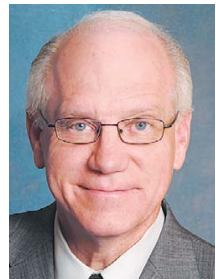
Today, we have "collaborative workspaces" where folks crowd together to work on communal tables. There, personal secrets can't be hidden long. Annoying traits quickly grate.

As a result, you increasingly see people on their phones in the hallways of workplaces or outside in common areas beavering away on their devices. Maybe it's my imagination, but it seems bathroom stalls are regularly filled these days – with lots of tapping noises overheard. Anything to get far from the madding crowd, I suppose.

So yeah, Cubicall's in-office mini-rooms make exquisite sense.

As you can tell, I was never a fan of creative office spaces. I viewed them as a cynical decision by employers to save rent by cramming more bodies into smaller spaces and declaring it "collaborative."

However, I've come around a bit. For one thing, we just don't need the personal space we used to, what with the diminution of computer towers and paper files. At least some workers



ONE MORE THING

Charles Crumpley

'Who doesn't want to retreat to a quiet space to make a call or just focus for a few distraction-free minutes?'

today need only a laptop and satchel, not an assigned office or even a desk. More of us are moving in that direction.

For another, let's admit that collaboration can be good. There's magic in a workplace where someone overhears a conversation and chimes in with an insight or a solution. That happens best when people are in earshot of one another.

Finally, it seems that creative workplaces have improved. I used to equate "creative workplace" with grim scenes of laptops lined up on folding tables. You still see some of that, sure, but you also see offices that have collaborative tables in the center but more spaces on the periphery where employees can retreat and work in private – perhaps easy chairs or unassigned offices.

So creative workplaces can be OK – if done right. If you have a space where people can work together, talk and share ideas, that's fine so long as there are places where workers can step to the side and have deep, one-on-one conversations or find utter quietness so they can focus.

But in the meantime, since there are still many employers that don't offer enough private spaces and still try to cram too many people to-

gether, Cubicall's little telephone booths may fill an important niche. And that makes the company an interesting startup.

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When California's gasoline tax went up last week, there was a flurry of articles about how state motorists now pay the highest such tax in the country and how gasoline here typically costs \$1 a gallon more than most other states.

I wouldn't mind paying more if I could boast that we have the best streets and highways. Alas, we don't. Various surveys regularly rank our roads poorly. Just recently, the American Society of Civil Engineers gave California a "D" for our road conditions, saying they are some of the worst in the country.

So excuse me if I'm skeptical that the new gas tax will do much to improve the condition of our streets. After all, the state doesn't exactly have a sterling reputation when it comes to fulfilling promises from taxes.

In 2004, California voters approved a 1 percent surtax on millionaires. The money was to bankroll various mental health treatment facilities; after all, many of the homeless are on the street because of their mental challenges. But in 2016, the independent oversight agency called the Little Hoover Commission essentially threw up its hands, reporting that auditors couldn't really say where the money had gone – \$17 billion by that point. The state at the time vowed to do better, but let me ask: Since then, does it seem to you that \$2 billion or so a year, about the amount the tax raises, is being spent on mental health? Again, that's \$2 billion a year.

Likewise, the state has spent about 50 percent more on K-12 education since 2012, when a new tax was passed. But test scores have not improved. Where's that extra money going?

Closer to home, we've passed taxes recently to help the homeless. Let me ask: Do you want to bet that the number of homeless will be reduced in the next few years?

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Bullying Businesses Hurts Schools

By JOEL FOX

Because business organizations opposed last month's vote for the Los Angeles Unified School District's Measure EE tax, the Los Angeles mayor, union leaders and school officials say business betrayed students. That's the message they sent by disinviting the Los Angeles Area Chamber of Commerce from the L.A. Compact, a partnership aimed at presenting a united front on education issues, funding and work opportunities for students. In a letter telling the chamber to get lost, members of the Compact told the business organization, "The chamber has made clear that it is not a reliable partner to our schools."

The letter signers said one of the goals of the Compact is to improve school funding and businesses opposed the school tax must be bad citizens. But there's more than one way to secure school funding. Chief among them is for the school district to clean up its act financially and create savings, especially when it comes to reforming health care and pension issues.

Look for remedies other than the big tax increase from the signers of the disinvite letter and you'll hardly hear a whisper.

Business knows how to manage a bottom line. Efficiencies, reforms and dealing with

fiscal realities are what keep businesses alive. That is all the businesspeople asked the school district to do before rushing a tax increase to the ballot. Leaders of the business organizations opposed to the tax, which included the Los Angeles County Business Federation (BizFed), the Valley Industry and Commerce Association along with the L.A. Chamber and other business groups, all made it clear if the district supported reforms they would advocate for more taxes for schools, as they have in the past.

After Measure EE was badly defeated at the polls, VICA announced it wanted to work with the LAUSD to implement meaningful reform. Other business groups issued similar statements offering to work to improve the schools.

Apparently, that's not the way the school establishment and the mayor's office want to play the game. Remember that a chief aide for the mayor threatened the head of BizFed as the Measure EE campaign began, warning business if they want cooperation from City Hall on any number of issues, they should back off the campaign. Business resisted the threat.

Now the mayor and others say they don't want to work with the business community any longer on school issues through the L.A. Compact.

Maybe business should take them up on it. It

will be a reminder that business in Los Angeles does quite a bit that benefits schools. Taxes on business are an important part of the schools' budget. Even more directly, business philanthropy for school functions and projects make an import difference in many students' lives.

If schools and the mayor don't want to work with business and business chooses not to work with schools, then the students suffer.

As someone who played a major role in helping get school construction funds for Los Angeles schools a quarter century ago, I know that bringing sides with different viewpoints together can work if the concerns of both sides are respected.

But, bullying from the mayor and the schools over the school funding has to stop. Then maybe they will listen to the need for reforms that will pave the way for increased efficiency and more funds for the schools.

Joel Fox is editor of Fox and Hounds Daily, which carries commentaries on the confluence of California business and politics. He is an adjunct professor at Pepperdine University's Graduate School of Public Policy and is well known as the longtime former president of the Howard Jarvis Taxpayers Association. He is a San Fernando Valley resident.

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