

California in 2050

Bill Fulton

Imagine life in California on the 200th anniversary of the state – only a little more than 20 years from now.

California is more diverse than ever before, as people with roots all over the world have settled in alongside longtime residents of all races and ethnicities. And the vast majority of Californians live in cities or older suburbs – places that were first developed in the decades after World War II – just like they do today.

Yet daily life is better.

Yes, most people still ride in cars – mostly electric and mostly self-driving, which have improved air quality and decreased traffic deaths. But more people have the ability to travel other ways as well, whether it's walking to the store, biking to work, or taking a train to another destination. And yes, people still often shop at warehouse retail stores. But they also order many things from local businesses that help sustain their local economy. They work at a wide variety of jobs – including in such longtime California mainstays as the tech industry and a revived manufacturing sector – adding not only value to the state's economy but opportunity and fulfillment to their own lives.

And, perhaps most important, they have a wide variety of opportunities to rent or buy homes they can afford and enjoy living in – overcoming one of the biggest challenges the state faced in the early 21st Century.

This description may seem optimistic, but it won't be a surprise if California actually looks like this in 2050. California has never followed the trajectory of a typical state. It is always reaching farther, digging deeper, never satisfied with the status quo.

The modern founding of California – dating back to the Gold Rush in 1848 – is of course a mixed blessing for the state. European settlement dating back to the Spanish Missions led to the tragic decline of indigenous tribes and the quest for gold wreaked environmental havoc that we still must deal with today. (Flood risk in the Sacramento Valley is a legacy of gold mining practices of the 19th Century.) Yet the discovery of gold also accelerated California's economic and social evolution and quickly created the wealth that laid the foundation for the modern state.

Indeed, California quickly developed a worldwide cache as a glamorous and exciting place where anything was possible. Little wonder that while other states adopted mottos like "Live Free or Die" and "Ever Upward," California's motto has always been "I Have Found It" ("Eureka")—the "it" meaning not only gold, but just about any limitless goal of human activity that seemed impossible to achieve anywhere else.

And California has been on the cutting edge ever since in wave after wave of innovation: railroads, aviation, movies, democracy, freeways, water, higher education, logistics, technology, climate change.

What's important about these waves of innovation is not that Californians pursued innovation for its own sake, but that the innovation both responded to and generated significant improvement to our society and our economy. Because not only is California always *innovating*. It's also always *changing*. And it's that *change* that has helped make California a better place in 2050.

To be sure, the California of 2050 is no longer the fast-growing "national suburb" from the go-go years of the mid 20th Century, dominated by vast tracts of single-family homes, freeways, and suburban lifestyles. But neither is it the somewhat troubled state of the late 20th and early 21st Centuries, wracked by natural disasters, economic uncertainty, and high cost. Rather, the mid 21st Century is bringing a new, changed attitude to California – one that is welcoming, inclusive, and bringing people together instead of pushing them apart.

For most of its 200 years, California was a machine for population growth – especially during and after World War II California added a half-million people a year for 70 years – from the Great Depression to the Great Recession – and the state's policymakers and pundits have long been concerned about how to handle a total population of 50 million people. As long ago as 1963, when California surpassed New York as the most populous state (with 16 million people) California Tomorrow published a report called ***50 Million Californians? A Guide to Growth***. And as recently as 2015, when the state had a population of 38 million the Governor's Office of Planning and Research issued a draft Environmental Goals and Policies Report titled ***A Strategy for California @ 50 Million***.

The state hasn't hit 50 million people by 2050, because growth began slowing down during COVID and has not hit previous levels. Still, for a long time, the *specter* of more growth created great divides in the state between those who saw opportunities in more housing and development and those who did not. Gradually, however, as California moved into the middle of the 21st Century, we have seen a change in attitudes.

In part this change in attitude has come about because of California's ever-diversifying population, where longtime residents and newcomers from around the world have come together to create a dynamic society. By 2050, indigenous tribes have been restored to a rightfully important and dignified place in both California's economy and its society and has even regained ownership of some land taken from them in the 19th Century.

But In part this change has come about because of climate change – an existential threat that has reinforced the idea that all Californians are bound together by both problems and opportunities. California has, of course, always been on the forefront of environmental conservation and the state has been a world leader in dealing with climate change.

Environmental protection dates back to the 1960s and the state began to seriously attack greenhouse gas emissions with the passage of the Global Warming Solutions Act in 2006.

As a result of, California in 2050 is the first carbon-neutral state – a major achievement by any measure and one that all Californians are proud of. Much of the publicity has in the planning world has dealt with reducing greenhouse gas emissions by reducing driving (the infamous vehicle miles traveled, or VMT). But many of the gains came from leaning into building technology and especially renewable energy, even at times when the rest of the country seemed to be leaning away from such approaches. By moving away from fossil fuels that generate air pollution as well as greenhouse gas emissions, California has created a healthier environment for all its residents, no matter what neighborhood they live in.

Even though California is now carbon-neutral, there is still a lot of work to be done as of 2050 not just in *fighting* climate change but in *adapting* to it. Despite our best efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, California is still at risk for sea-level rise, wildfires, flooding, and other natural hazards becoming more common because of climate change. California still uses some traditional “hard” infrastructure solutions to adapt to the new climate environment. But more often the state and its communities are focusing on “natural” solutions.

In some cases, this has meant “hardening” communities from hazards through such techniques as removing trees and brush from around houses in areas of high wildfire risk. But there is also new respect for the idea that humans can’t always mitigate the risk. Sometimes the only way to eliminate the risk of a natural hazard is to ensure that homes and other structures don’t get built in risky areas at all.

And that, in turn, has helped lay the foundation for the California of 2050 to tackle what, earlier in the century, seemed like an unsolvable problem: the crisis of housing supply and affordability that limited upward mobility and drove families out of the state. It has been a long-hard struggle since then, balancing the interests of current residents with conserving California’s natural resources and also with the need to provide more “abundance,” in the form of new houses, new schools and libraries, new transportation facilities, new renewable energy facilities, and other things that communities need to thrive.

Critical to solving the housing problem was reaching consensus – at both the state level and the regional level – about where infill development should go and which areas should be permanently conserved. Yes, some “greenfield” areas of the state have continued to develop, providing new single-family home ownership for many families in less expensive parts of the state. But major undeveloped areas of the state have been preserved, providing both long-term environmental protection for California’s regions and unprecedented outdoor opportunities for Californians. At the same time, infill development has been carefully woven into existing communities, providing more amenities and a richer life for the people who already lived in them as well as new residents.

The end result is that California is a more urban state, where a new urban pattern in older communities – more condos, more townhomes, more duplexes – also provides more opportunity for young families to buy and rent houses they like in locations near where they work, which has stemmed the outward flow of families to other states.

This changed attitude toward development and conservation freed Californians from the 70-year battle over growth, allowing them to focus instead on the inclusive prosperity so critical to the state's future.

Even during California's darkest times, its economy has been the envy of the world. In 2050, California is still the technology capital of the world, as it has been for almost a hundred years. Along with the tech economy, however, California has seen a surge in "advanced manufacturing," using automation, robotics, and software to make things faster, cheaper, and better. There was a time when manufacturing left California because of high cost. But proximity to California's technological innovation, greater productivity, and a deep pool of talent have led many California companies to retain some of their manufacturing operations in the state. It's many of these advanced manufacturing companies don't employ as many workers as old factories did. But the manufacturing renaissance has led to more manufacturing jobs that California has seen in decades.

And many of these advanced manufacturing companies work in California's robust green and blue economies – the economies focused on improving the environment and taking advantage of the state's vast maritime resources. Wind turbine manufacturers, for example, value proximity to local testbeds from Altamont Pass to Coachella Valley. But the blue economy thrives as well – everything from tourism that attracts visitors from around the globe to a robust fishing industry revived by coastal protections to underwater robotics fed by California's great university research system and its advanced manufacturing infrastructure.

Just as important, the robust economy and improvements to the housing situation and neighborhoods have created more equitable opportunity for everybody in California. As traditionally underrepresented groups and tribes have become more involved in policy decisions at the regional and local level, the doors have opened to meaningful work and a dignified way of life for them. The "abundance" approach has helped provide not just more homes, but schools, transportation facilities, and community amenities across the board. California's world-class higher education system has played an important role -- not just the University of California and the Cal State system, but community colleges as well, which have used both technical training and bachelor's degrees in emerging fields to help new Californians toward upward mobility.

And so the inevitable question is, what will the *third* century of California look like? Can the upward trajectory seen from the 2020s to 2050 continue? Will population growth soar as in the 20th Century? What role will new Californians from around the world play in the state's prosperity and cultural life? What businesses and technologies will power California in the future?

We don't know the answers to these questions yet. But we do know that California, as always, be on the cusp of change going into the 22nd Century – and, as always, Californians will embrace that change and ride it to a better future.

AUTHOR BIO:

Bill Fulton, FAICP, is one of nation's major thought leaders on land use, housing, economic development, and urban development. He currently serves as a Professor of Practice in the [Department of Urban Studies and Planning](#) and the [Design Lab](#) at the University of California, San Diego, where he also serves as Co-Director of the Center for Housing Policy and Design, as well as a Fellow at the [Turner Center for Housing Innovation](#) at UC Berkeley. Bill previously served as Mayor of Ventura, Director of Planning and Economic Development for the City of San Diego, and Director of the Kinder Institute for Urban Research at Rice University in Houston. He is the author of several books on cities and urban planning in California, including *The Reluctant Metropolis: The Politics of Urban Growth in Los Angeles* and *Guide to California Planning*.