

Three Good Options

California in 2050

Fresno, July 2050

Mai Xiong opens the windows at six in the morning.

It is the best hour of the day in July, cool and blue, and the air is clean enough that she does not check her air quality app first. She just opens the windows.

Her mother used to check. For most of Mai's childhood a number went up on a sticky note on the refrigerator every morning, and that number decided whether the children went outside. Some summers it stayed red for two weeks. Nobody called it an emergency, because it happened every year.

Outside, two neighbors are working out who is taking whose kids to the pool. The trees on this block are big now, planted around 2030 by people who understood they would not be the ones sitting under them. The bus down Belmont comes every eight minutes and passes so quietly that does not interfere with neighbors' conversation.

The kitchen

Mai is forty-two and runs the front office at the elementary school on Tulare, which she likes and which does not pay much. Her daughter Camila is eighteen and has to decide something by Friday.

Option one is a paid apprenticeship with the regional water agency, four years, ending in a license and a job that will exist for the rest of her life. Option two is the university twenty minutes away, which she can attend without borrowing money, and whose water and climate institute draws students from Michigan and Seoul to study something the Valley knows more about than anywhere on earth. Option three is a Fresno company building grid storage that has offered her a starting salary higher than what her mother makes now.

Rosa, Mai's mother, is seventy and lives four blocks away in an apartment above a clinic, close enough to walk over. She thinks Camila should take the money. Mai thinks she should take the license. Camila has not said what she is thinking.

What strikes Mai, listening, is that all three options are good. Camila may get some of it wrong, and that is fine. No choice on this table costs her health insurance, requires her to leave the Valley, or turns one stressful month into the loss of an apartment.

When Mai was eighteen, in 2026, the ambitious kids left. You went to the Bay Area or Los Angeles, and the ones who stayed were understood, to have not made it. The Valley exported its talented children and then wondered why it struggled.

Two of Camila's friends are leaving anyway, and neither of them has to. Mai visited her cousin in Oakland last spring and came back quiet about it. Her cousin teaches sixth grade, works one job, and lives twenty minutes from her school in an apartment she can easily afford with her teaching salary. On Saturday they took a train and then a bus and were walking above the water by ten, along with half the city, a trip Mai's aunt used to describe as ninety minutes of traffic each way. The older man running the hardware store counter, who knew everyone who came in, had lived in a tent under the freeway for most of a decade.

Camila knows this history. She has heard it from Rosa, who came to the Valley at nineteen, cleaned houses in Clovis for eleven years, and now owns her apartment and sits on the board of the clinic downstairs. Her three good options took three generations to build. Staying is one of the things she gets to want.

That is what opportunity turned out to mean. Not one door opening. Several doors, all meaningful, none of them requiring you to leave the people who raised you, and none of them locking the others behind you when you choose.

The street

At seven, Mai walks to the corner for eggs. It is a four-minute walk and it pleasantly takes fifteen.

She passes the apartment building where the Ortegas live, a row of townhomes built on what used to be a parking lot, and four old single-family houses from the sixties, one with a cottage in back that Dale Whitcomb built when his wife got sick and he needed a nurse close by. Marisol Ortega is out with her hose, arguing that the summer market should move to Saturdays. Dale, who is eighty-one, has an opinion about Saturdays. The three of them stand there long enough that Mai forgets what she came out for.

This is what the street was designed to do. Nobody scripted the conversation, but everything that made it possible was somebody's decision: shade at the right intervals, benches where people stop, a corner store that survived because the homes around it gave it customers, a road narrow enough to talk across, and enough kinds of housing on one block that an eighty-one-year-old, a young family, and a nurse working nights all live in sight of each other. Density of people turned out to be density of relationships. It was drawn that way.

Cars exist. Dale has one, Mai's household shares one with the Ortegas, and Marisol's sister has not owned one in a decade because an electric shuttle reaches her corner in four minutes. The mountains on Sunday still need a car. The clinic, the school, the market, and the job do not. When Mai's household

gave up its second car, nine hundred dollars a month stayed in the household, which is most of what let her start saving at all.

The technology works the same way. The clinic knows when Rosa's prescription is running low and she has it before she notices. The bus tells the truth about when it is coming. A reported streetlight gets fixed, by someone Mai has met. Each of those is a small tax on attention that somebody chose to remove, and the attention goes somewhere better, usually to each other.

Not every block looks like this. Two miles north, past the freeway, the trees went in fifteen years later and are still small. But, growing. People there know the who finally made the decision to plant those much-needed trees.

Mai comes back later than she meant to and better than she left.

The meeting

Thursday evening the neighborhood council meets in the community room behind the library, and Mai goes because she has gone for six years, because there is coffee and someone brings pastries from Vang's, and because tonight they are deciding where the new childcare spaces go.

It is not a hearing. Does not requires a sign-in sheet, no three-minute timer, no row of officials facing a row of residents. Thirty people around tables, half of them eating, four of them staff from the city, the county, and the regional agency, also eating. Priya Raman from the county has been coming to this room for nine years. She knows Dale's knee is bad, that the Ortegas' oldest just started at the water agency, and that anything on the north side goes through Yolanda Briggs first.

That is the whole innovation. Priya was here in March and in May and will be here in September, and she was here through two years when nothing in this neighborhood was funded and there was nothing to ask anybody about.

Because of that, Thursday can be short. There is a plan to convert two blocks of Belmont for the market, it takes away eleven parking spaces, and Dale has been against it since February. He says his piece again. Marisol answers him. Priya says the county is going to do it, starting in October, and here is what they will do for the two businesses that will actually be hurt.

Dale is a bit annoyed. He is not betrayed. Those are different things, and the difference is most of what changed since 2025.

In 2025 this would have taken fourteen months: a scoping meeting, a survey nobody trusted, a workshop with dots on posters, a draft, a comment period, a revision, and a hearing at six on a Tuesday where eleven people spoke and the loudest got what they wanted. Most of it designed to demonstrate that the public had been consulted, very little of it designed to find out what anyone thought. Everyone

knew it was theater and at the end the county and powerful voices would usually do what they had planned anyway, having spent a year making these people feel engaged. This happened since people hardly trusted one another.

The engagement did not go away. It persisted. It stopped being an event attached to a project and became a relationship that runs all year, whether or not there is money. Once the relationship is always on, government stops having to buy consent one project at a time.

They have also watched Priya lose. Two years ago Yolanda's group wanted the north side crossing done first and the county did the south side first, for reasons Priya explained at this table in plain language, and Yolanda still thinks it was the wrong call. She says so at most meetings. She is still here. That is what a working relationship looks like: people who disagree about real things and keep showing up.

None of this now guarantees the decision is right. Belmont in October may go badly. What it now guarantees is that it was made by people who know this neighborhood, out loud, fast enough to be useful, and that if it goes badly the county will hear about it in November from thirty people already at the table rather than in a lawsuit two years later.

The childcare question takes twenty minutes and ends with the room asking Priya what it would take to do both sites. Mai says the thing she came to say.

She is not on the council and has never testified at a hearing. But she knows what is happening on Belmont in October, she knows who decided it, and if she wanted it changed she knows which three people to talk to and where they will be on the second Thursday of next month.

The agency

Priya has worked for the county for twenty-three years, and she can tell you the week she almost quit.

It was 2029, two years in. Eleven months on a shade and cooling plan for four neighborhoods, including this one. Good plan, nobody opposed it, and it died in review anyway. Three agencies each needed a sign-off, each sign-off required a document, and one document required a consultant the county could not afford that year. Nobody killed it. It could not survive its own process. Priya remembers trying to explain that to a room of people on the north side who had given her eleven months of their evenings, and failing, because it did not make sense.

She stayed. A lot of people did not.

The rules did not go away, and Priya still spends real time on them. What changed is what they are for. The county used to run on an assumption that the worst thing that could happen was a mistake traceable to someone, so the process made sure nothing was traceable to anyone, which meant nothing could be decided by anyone. Now the worst thing that can happen is failing to deliver. Now, the rules

exist to help things get built. When something does not get built, there is rarely a hunt for who to blame, because everyone expects the county to come back and finish it, and it usually does.

Which is why Priya can commit the county to a project on a Thursday evening in a community room, with a budget she controls and her name attached. And why, in 2043, when the cooling centers failed, it was her name on it.

That was the summer of the long heat wave. The county had built its plan around twelve cooling centers, and the centers were the wrong instrument. People did not go. Leaving your house for a gymnasium is not something people do until they are already in trouble, and by then it is a medical emergency. Thirty-two people ended up in emergency rooms that August, most of them over seventy, most within a mile of a center that was open and nearly empty.

The county said so. The review took six weeks instead of two years, stated in plain language that the strategy had been wrong, and named who approved it. Priya presented it in this same room. Yolanda asked why nobody had listened to the people who said in 2041 that the centers would not work, and Priya said she and her colleagues had heard them and done it anyway, and that this was the mistake.

For about a year, people on the north side stopped believing the county understood heat. Attendance dropped. Yolanda's group ran its own check-ins the next summer and did not tell Priya until August. It took two years and one program that actually worked to earn the relationship back.

Nobody was fired. That is the part that would have been hardest to believe in 2025. The county changed the program instead: money for cooling in the homes people already live in, crews going door to door in the first week of a heat event, and a list of who to knock on first that Yolanda's group maintains. It has worked every summer since.

A government that will be destroyed for a failure cannot admit one. It spends its energy on the appearance of never having been wrong, which is expensive and slow and produces no learning at all. Californians decided, over about fifteen years, that they would rather have a government that tries things and tells the truth about them. They did not become more forgiving. They came to know the people doing the work, watched them deliver more often than not, and could tell the difference between an agency that failed and an agency that did not care.

Trust is not a soft outcome. It is the operating condition that lets a government move at the speed the century requires.

Priya is fifty-six. Her mother spent thirty-one years in a public agency and came home tired in a way that had little to do with the amount of work. Priya's job is more demanding, and she does not come home like that.

How we got here

None of this was inevitable, and none of it was fast.

Engagement is a relationship, and relationships do not have start dates. Around 2027 a few regions ran out of patience with the workshop-and-comment-period model. The early versions were awkward. Some places paid residents to sit on standing bodies and were accused of buying opinions. Some built councils that three people attended. The version that survived was funded outside of any single project, which was the key. Once the money stopped riding on whether a grant came through, staff could keep showing up in years when there was nothing to announce. It took a decade to compound into something you could feel, and the people who kept it alive in the lean years were mostly community organizations that had been doing it unpaid for a generation.

A government punished for every failure stops attempting anything worth failing at. Between 2026 and 2035 the state had to move faster than its own procedures allowed, over and over, for fires and heat and floods and a housing shortage that had become a moral emergency. Emergency authority kept getting used because it was the only thing that worked, and eventually someone asked the obvious question: if we can do it in ninety days when a town burns, what is the other process for? The reforms were unglamorous. Consolidated permitting. Single points of accountability with real names on them. Budgets a program director could actually spend. Reviews that took six weeks and were published. Two of the first agencies to work this way were embarrassed publicly within three years. They survived, other agencies watched them survive, and that was when the culture turned.

Places were competing on the wrong thing. For decades the state moved money by asking places to apply for it. What that measured was the ability to produce a winning application. Cities with grant departments won. Cities without them hired consultants, or lost. The north side of this neighborhood applied eleven times over sixteen years for the same improvements, and each application was a little better and the answer was the same.

In the early 2030s the money split in two. Underneath, a baseline: the things every community gets because people live there, including clean air, shade, a school that works, transit that comes, and a clinic within reach. Nobody applies for a baseline. It goes where the need is, measured openly, and the accountability sits on whether it got delivered.

The first baseline was badly underfunded, and because it was underfunded it reached the neighborhoods with the most practiced advocates first, which was the old problem in new clothes. The north side waited another decade. That is why the baseline is now set by formula, funded ahead of everything else, and reported publicly every year against what was promised. It took the north side to teach the state that a guarantee without money behind it is just a longer application.

Above the baseline are the bets, and competition for those got sharper. Places still make a case for the ambitious thing they want to build, and they do not all win. What changed is what they compete on. A

region makes its case on what it is distinctly positioned to do: the water expertise that only exists in the Valley, the port, the university, the workforce, the particular history. The Valley stopped submitting applications that made it sound like a worse version of the Bay Area and started making the case for what it alone could do, which is why Camila's apprenticeship exists. Nobody competes for the same thing. Every place still competes for what it wants to be known for.

Who did it. No single person and nobody famous. Public employees who stayed through the years when staying was demoralizing and who eventually held the jobs where the rules got written. Community organizations that had been doing relational engagement without a budget line since before it had a name. A generation who grew up in the Valley, went into planning and public health and public works, and came back. Legislators who traded credit for delivery. Residents like Dale, who lost the parking argument and kept coming.

Technology helped and did not lead. It made small jurisdictions competent, which mattered enormously here. It made service delivery faster. It never made a decision anyone had to live with, because Californians decided early that they wanted their decisions made by people they could name.

Friday

Camila takes the apprenticeship. Rosa says twice at dinner that she is leaving money on the table, and Mai, who wanted exactly this, has the sense not to look pleased about it. In four years Camila will have a license and work in the Valley or elsewhere, and if she wants the world renown university later it will still be twenty minutes away and still affordable, and the grid company will still be hiring, because that is how this was built.

The apprenticeship exists because a region made a case for something it was distinctly good at. The high ranked university is affordable because of an argument mostly won in the 2030s. The clinic under Rosa's apartment is there because a county employee committed to it in a room anyone in the neighborhood could walk into on a Thursday evening. The trees on Belmont went in twenty years ago and the ones two miles north went in five, and everyone can tell you why.

Camila knows all of this. She was raised at a table where people talked about how things came to be, and she can trace her three options back to her grandmother arriving here at nineteen with nothing. What she does not feel is lucky. She is not the exception in her family, or on her street, or in her city. She is what the ordinary case looks like now.

None of this required a technology that does not exist. It required a government that decided its people were partners rather than an audience, and a public that decided its government was allowed to try things and even fail.

Twenty-five years is a long time. It is also one working career. Everyone who built this was already in the room in 2025.

AUTHOR BIO

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I help public initiatives deliver for everyone they are meant to serve. Plans and policies get approved; delivery is the hard part. My work focuses on implementation: the stretch between an approved plan and results people can see in their neighborhood.

I work with program leaders in state and local government, the community organizations that deliver with them, the funders that back the work, and companies carrying public commitments such as community benefits agreements, utility programs, and workforce agreements. Through The Triangle, I offer training and coaching, evaluation and learning, and speaking. Everything is built with your team, so the capability stays after the engagement ends.

Over more than 20 years across government, nonprofits, academia, start-ups, and consulting, I have seen public initiatives from every side: how policy is written, how funding flows, how work gets delivered with communities, and how results get measured. I currently serve as Program Director of Sustainable Environmental Design at UC Berkeley. Earlier, I served as Senior Advisor in the California Governor's Office on California Jobs First, advised the White House Office of Science and Technology Policy, and reviewed multi-billion-dollar EPA grant programs. Internationally, I led research for THE LINE at NEOM in Saudi Arabia, advised Yunnan Province in China on using big data for eco-tourism strategy, and partnered with Indigenous communities in Panama on community development.