

Saying 'No' to More

By Antonio Rossmann

SAN FRANCISCO — In a statewide referendum last month, California voters sent an extraordinary message to the rest of the nation: growth and the resources to sustain it are no longer affordable. This pronouncement from the holiest temple of boosterism cannot be ignored. The California electorate, in rejecting a major water project for the first time in its history, yielded a new majority of skeptical resource consumers in the south and devoted resource conservationists in the north. That such an alliance overruled California's century-old doctrine of expansionism should cause political and business leaders throughout the nation to reassess visions of growth at any cost.

At issue was the Peripheral Canal — a channel as long and wide as the Suez Canal, engineered to convey Sacramento River water around that river's delta for pumping to the San Joaquin Valley and the southern California metropolises. Designed to meet the state's needs well into the 21st century, the canal's cost was put at \$5 billion or more. Like the first Owens Valley aqueduct that created modern Los Angeles, the Peripheral Canal would not serve an existing need but would insure future supplies on which the state could promote additional expansion.

The vote against the canal wasn't even close: statewide only 33 percent

supported it. Broken down, the returns showed at best tepid assent of the southern California electorate whom the project was designed to benefit and decisive rejection in the water-rich north. In the 10 southern counties that embrace more than two-thirds of California's population, the canal received 60 percent of the votes cast; but with the southern voter turnout 20 percent below normal, the canal hardly earned a majority of popular support in the south. In the northern 48 counties, 92 percent rejected the proposition.

The unprecedented messages of both the southern and northern electorate must be heeded. Generations have grown up under the doctrine that growth is progress and with the practice of obtaining that growth by ever-expanding resource extraction. Southern Californians now tell us that they are not that sure any more. Southerners also rejected the premise that "we need the water" to fulfill future needs, thus casting aside a cornerstone of their cultural heritage. The daily experience of smog, congested freeways and erosion of the region's rare natu-

ral beauty challenged the wisdom of spending now to worsen these impacts tomorrow. In sum, southern California rendered a finding that growth simply costs too much.

Even if southern Californians had turned out in proportion to their northern counterparts, the canal would have failed against the decisive northern vote. The voting was not a referendum on the canal's engineering and legal specifications; it stood as northern Californians' judgment against the southland's expansionism and perceived prodigal waste. Northern Californians could not comprehend the call for additional sprawl of the semiarid southern metropolises. Northerners also remembered that in the great 1976-77 drought when they cut their water use in half, southern California's enormous aqueducts enabled it to escape conservation and rationing. In a blend of self-interest and principle, those who inhabit the region from which the water comes found the water's potential consumers unworthy to receive the resources.

Thus the south, which for decades

resisted initiatives that the state be divided to separate the resources from its majority of people, now paid the price for effectively unifying the state through construction of its aqueducts. Having fought to keep the resources of the north within a common jurisdiction, southerners last week suffered the political consequence of also including within their jurisdiction a unified northern electorate that could frustrate further water exports.

Officials in Washington who administer the great public domain of the West, and the corporate leaders of the East whose private domain includes remaining remote resources, would do well to heed last month's message from California. Those who inhabit the region of resource origin have found the costs of extraction intolerable and have asserted a unified resolve to deny their resources to the urban majority. But that urban majority no longer wants or needs growth at any cost. California's new-found alliance of conservationists and consumers will surely emerge in — and determine — other resource conflicts in the remaining years of this century.

Antonio Rossmann, who teaches resources law at the University of California's Hastings College of Law, was moderator for debates on the canal sponsored by the California Bar.