

## Joe Mathews: Forget Anaheim, Bring Disneyland To Fresno

By Joe  
Mathews



On Christmas Eve, it felt like the park was all ours.

When I was growing up in the 1980s and early '90s, Disneyland was so reliably empty on the day before Christmas that it became a family tradition to spend December 24 in the “Happiest Place on Earth,” often along with a visit to my grandmother, who lived in Anaheim. When my uncle, a Disney freak and expert park navigator, came down from Northern California to join us, we could ride every attraction in eight hours. Tickets got more expensive each year, but they didn’t break the bank; in 1989, adult admissions for one day, without any discount, were \$23.50, and kids ages 3 to 12 were \$18.50.

Today, I have three little kids, the oldest of whom is 6, but I wouldn’t think of taking them to Disneyland. Disney—via special events and the invention of holiday attractions—has all but eliminated any notion of an off-season. Christmas week is now so busy that ticket sales are sometimes cut off as Disneyland and its sister park, Disney’s California Adventure, reach capacity. This year, you’ll probably find the worst holiday traffic in California on Main Street USA.

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And the expense of taking the kids would be hard to justify. Disney has hiked the cost of a one-day ticket to visit just one of its two Anaheim parks to \$96 for anyone 10 or older. For children ages 3 to 9, it's \$90. Throw in gas money and another \$17 to \$22 for parking, and for a family of five, we're talking \$500 just to walk in the gate, before we eat or drink a thing.

That's enough to raise the question of whether the average Californian—median annual per capita income in the state is a tick under \$30,000—can afford to visit this most iconic of California places. Even worse, admission inflation seems to outpace other inflation gauges—one-park, one-day admission has gone from \$63 to \$96 since 2006, despite the Great Recession. Remarkably, attendance to the park increased over the same time period.

True to California life, Disneyland has become overcrowded as a result of the combination of its popularity and underinvestment in infrastructure (which is to say, not enough new parks). The company manages this problem by raising prices -- and making it harder for Southern Californians to come to the park. This latter move feels like a betrayal of the community that helped put Mickey on the map.

Disney has suspended sales of the Southern California Annual Passport that many locals bought in order to visit frequently throughout the year. (Those who have the passes can renew them, according to the Disneyland website, but no new passes are being issued.) Disney does offer a "select" Southern California pass, but it works on fewer than half the days of the year; neither brand of local pass gets you into the park during the height of the summer or the weeks of Christmas and New Year's.

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Now, there are probably a few people reading this who do not see our diminishing access to Disneyland as an issue as serious as access to, say, affordable healthcare or high-quality public education. But for those Californians who understand that a visit to Disneyland is an essential California cultural experience that should be denied no one, it's obvious we face a statewide crisis that cries out for a forceful response.

What could that be? As Walt Disney once promised: "Disneyland will never be completed. It will continue to grow as long as there is imagination left in the world." So here's what I'm imagining, to fulfill Uncle Walt's vision: a state constitutional amendment that guarantees every child born in California one free visit to Disneyland before he or she turns 18. For the record, I'd insert this new birthright in Article X, which already guarantees the right of every Californian to access our coast.

Such a right is easily justified by history; we launched the Disney park empire in California in 1955. Certainly Disney and other capitalists might object to the cost of all those free admissions, but wouldn't there be considerable long-term public relations value in making Disneyland one of the rare experiences all young Californians share?

With fewer than 500,000 native Californians born a year, we're talking about less than \$50 million annually in new financial commitments. If Disney or the state generously wanted to open the program to every California resident under the age of 18 right now (9 million people according to the census), we'd still be talking a less than \$1 billion hit, spread over many years, for a company with annual revenues approaching \$50 billion.

I must admit there are two issues with a Disneyland-for-all-kids constitutional amendment. The first is practical: This new right could create even more crowds in the short run.

Columnist Joe Mathews says land next to Fresno's planned high speed rail station would be the perfect spot for a new Disneyland.

Credit High Speed Rail Authority

The second issue is constitutional. One of California's finest legal scholars has informed me that, despite all the crazy things already in the state constitution, this measure forcing a private company to provide free goods to the citizenry might be blocked as an unconstitutional "taking"—unless the right comes with "just compensation" for Disney.



Both issues are easily handled—with one stroke that would solve the problem of Disneyland access and a few other California quandaries.

Here it is, Mickey! The state should acquire and give Disney a piece of land, with all environmental approvals and entitlements in place, large enough to build another park in California. Where? Disney could build a third park on a large piece of land next to its Anaheim resort, but hasn't moved to do so. (One reason: The city of Anaheim is not nearly as friendly to Disney as it once was.) Land on the coast would cost too much, so it should be inland. And to leverage corporate welfare, the land should be tied to another public project that is already acquiring large amounts of land.

The perfect location: something close to the planned high-speed rail station in Fresno.

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