

Murphy: Lessons from a visit to Mexico

Contributed by Philip Murphy
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A couple of weeks ago I was able to spend a few days south of the border for the first time in over a decade, and it was a sobering experience.

While most of my time was spent in built-up tourista areas, I did get to do a fair amount of driving around and got to see some of the poorer and more rural areas as well, and was surprised by what I observed everywhere I went.

Of course there were the loud-mouth drunk American tourists to keep one's national pride in check, but the thing that was truly humbling as a gringo was what the locals were doing.

Probably the most obvious example was the condition of the roads; even in the most humble neighborhoods the pavement was better than almost ANY street in Lakeport, and nowhere were the roadways as crude as they are in the city of Clearlake.

The reason was apparent everywhere I went, as road construction/repair was taking place all over the place. Mexico has obviously decided that good roads mean safe travels and good jobs for lots of people, and they are investing heavily in this aspect of their infrastructure.

It was also obvious that the building boom bust had not yet affected Mexico, as all sorts of structures were being erected – homes, businesses and government buildings, too. Signs of prosperity were everywhere, and there were no signs of some of our social problems, which had even more impact on me than it did on my last visit many years ago when it was not too uncommon to see children working.

There were no homeless people panhandling or stumbling around drunk in the parks, unlike my hometown of San Francisco, where the crazies, drunks and druggies roam the streets in annoying and sometimes frightening groups with barely any attempts to redirect their behavior.

Then there was the garbage issue, or to be more precise, the lack of it. Poor neighborhood, tourist zone or rural highways were all the same, they were trash-free.

I'm not sure if this is because an army of workers are employed to pick up roadside refuse or if people just don't throw so much stuff out the window of their cars, but whatever the reason for it the lack of misplaced garbage it made me think of the litter-choked ditches and roadsides around here, and how even when they are picked up a week later they're a mess again in some places, I have a hard time just keeping up with my trash problem generated by the one-third of a mile of county road that bisects my property.

Not only were the roadsides trash-free, but everywhere I saw a public garbage can in Mexico it was divided into two sides, organic and non-organic halves. Apparently Mexicans are more concerned with recycling than Americans, and are making the effort to sort all the trash they can into groups that can help keep landfills from getting used and again, keep people employed while preserving natural resources.

So I kept wondering, why can't we do some of these things? Are Americans too dumb or lazy to sort garbage? It does take a couple of seconds to read the signs that tell you what goes where, plus a bit of eye-hand coordination to get it there, can that be beyond us?

Haven't we been playing games by postponing road repairs for too long, and now the problem is so big it seems almost hopeless to try to get caught up?

Should we settle for roads that are unacceptable in third world countries, and continue to spend the nation's wealth on B-2 bombers and wars in far-off places that never threatened us?

If Mexico can keep crazy people off the streets and stop lazy people and drunks from annoying the rest of the citizenry then why can't we?

This isn't how you show leadership, it's time to pull our heads out of the sand folks, unless we want to become another Britain in our lifetimes.

Philip Murphy lives in Finley.

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