

# Stop complaining and find solutions

By James E. Canales

President John F. Kennedy had a plaque on his desk inscribed with the words of an old fisherman's prayer: "Oh God thy sea is so great ... and my boat is so small." That captures the thought of just about any foundation CEO. With seemingly infinite need and relatively finite resources, effective philanthropy can be a challenge.

When I look at the problems swelling around California and then consider the scope of Irvine's resources to do something about it ... that sea looks quite vast, and the boat looks very small indeed.

I also find inspiration in the perspective of another "nautical" philosopher — In Steven Spielberg's "Jaws," when the police chief first sees the size and power of his foe, when he sees just how big that shark actually is, he stumbles back a bit, but then recovers and tells the scruffy captain: "You're gonna need a bigger boat."

And that's the spirit that we are celebrating today. We are building a bigger boat. Each of us plays a critical role as donor, supporter, adviser, champion or just a caring citizen who knows the value that a strong community delivers.

We have come together because we believe that community foundations are critical resources. They understand the needs and aspirations of their communities and in helping to increase the resources available to meet these aspirations. Irvine has a long history of partnering with community foundations, and we have been proud to partner with the Fresno Regional Foundation.

As head of the largest multipurpose foundation focused exclusively on California, I often am asked how I see the state, its problems, and what can be done about them. I think people expect to hear a litany of woe ... complaints about the system ... words like "broken," "dysfunctional" and

"crisis." At times, it can be easy to give in to this sentiment and wonder where to begin in assessing our woes.

But, I don't give in. And the reason is that the best philanthropy requires optimism and embraces the art of the possible. That optimism can't be blind, and it has to be balanced with realism, but for us at the Irvine Foundation, we firmly believe Californians deserve better. And we must play our role to make it so.

These days our community discourse centers on complaints and blame, on blowing up problems to huge proportions or simplifying issues until there is nothing left but the extremes. People are shouting past each other. No one's listening. And I think we have mistakenly substituted this exchange for actually working on the issues we face.

We have come to accept the hyperbole as if it were data, the talking points as if they were dialogue, and the zingers as if they were leadership. Regardless of our political ideology, we cannot play that game. It's just not helpful and Californians deserve better.

California faces real challenges. And the future of this Valley is indeed vital to the future of California. Up and down the state we have problems. But they are problems that can be solved.

We should be actively working toward solutions rather than constantly redefining the problem. Let me share three ideas I have about how we should be moving forward, more constructively.

To get things moving, I believe we have to quit the waiting game and begin to act, in concert, to address the critical issues before us in the community. Framing our discourse as a shouting match is a convenient technique to mask denial ... to postpone having to actually work on the problems.

I saw in a recent LA Times poll that 75% of Californians think

the country is on the wrong track. So if we are on the wrong track ... and we opt to do nothing ... won't we just move further off track?

We need to get to work confronting issues in our state and working toward constructive solutions. And, yes, that's probably going to mean compromise. It's definitely going to require taking a break from the polemic extremes and being practical about doing what we can with what we have.

We know the weak state of America's economy; Europe's debt crisis; Asia's growing pains. California's economy is not doing much better, but we have a large number of assets ranging from our entrepreneurial capacity to our position on the Pacific Rim to our diversity. California may face the same challenges as other places, but I would argue that we have more going for us if we can summon the courage to act and begin to utilize our assets to build up our state and strengthen our together to make a difference right here at home.

I remain hopeful about California. Not out of blind optimism, but because I see the assets we have and the potential for us to use these assets to make progress. We do deserve better, and so we must shift our tone and commit ourselves to a more constructive, results-oriented approach where we can all work together.

Let's remember what California once did by investing in its future: We led the way in creating the best system of higher education in the world; we transformed our land into an agricultural powerhouse that feeds the world, and we tapped our pioneering spirit to create the place we know as Silicon Valley. That's what Californians can do.

► James E. Canales is president and CEO of the James Irvine Foundation. This commentary was excerpted from his speech on Wednesday to the Fresno Regional Foundation.