Salinas is a city with a storied past, a complex present, and a spirited determination to overcome intractable problems and the negative stereotypes they have engendered. In a community where almost one-third of the population is under 18, the future is very much up for grabs.

Few places better exemplify the adage that geography is destiny. Salinas, the Salad Bowl of the World, anchors a valley that produces most of the lettuce eaten in this country, along with dozens of other vegetables and fruits. The fertile land with its idyllic Mediterranean clime has influenced the economic, political, and social landscape of the valley for generations, enriching some and impoverishing others. The proximity to Silicon Valley, just an hour north, has become a two-edged sword, drawing residents to Salinas but also exacerbating an already-high cost of living. Last but not least, Salinas lies a scant 10 miles

For more information, see Zocalo Public Square series, “Salinas: California’s Richest Poor City.”
“East of Eden,” as native son John Steinbeck described the coastal playground of the Monterey peninsula. This trifecta of geographic forces has shaped Salinas’s destiny in ways that transcend the economy, affecting demographics, culture, civic life, housing, and even philanthropy.

Salinas is separated from the Monterey peninsula by the Santa Lucia Mountains, but it is the metaphysical divide known as the “lettuce curtain” that forms a far more formidable barrier between the two worlds. It’s a social and cultural division; for some farmworker families, who never see the ocean, even a literal barrier. Conversely, there is little that draws the people and money on the other side over to Salinas; cornerstone institutions in Monterey have traditionally been reluctant to bridge the divide. The perception in Salinas is that the wealth and philanthropy of Monterey are more likely to be spent in far-off places than in nearby Salinas.

There is no shortage of needs closer to home. Like many agricultural regions, Salinas was a laboratory in income inequality long before the phrase became commonplace. The agricultural economy has depended on successive waves of immigrant farmworkers, in recent decades largely Mexican, and largely undocumented. That has fueled the transformation of Salinas from a predominantly white city that once boasted the highest per capita wealth in the country to an overwhelmingly Latino city with high poverty rates.

In recent years, Salinas has made national headlines for all the wrong reasons: Record-high homicide rates, low educational achievement, food contamination scares. Statistics support the bad press, but statistics tell only a fraction of the story. The reality is far more nuanced, and residents grow weary of defending their city against oversimplified portrayals of a gang-infested agricultural wasteland. Gang-related crime and shootings are real, significant problems; but the relationship between the police department and residents, after years-long efforts to build coalitions, is far better than in many comparable cities. Educational levels lag far behind state norms; but there are innovative educational programs and first-rate students. Poverty is endemic, but immigrant families are fiercely committed to education as a path to greater opportunity, and the number of first generation college students from Salinas continues to grow.

In many ways, Salinas is a mirror of California’s challenges — riven by income inequality, troubled by lack of economic opportunity and low levels of civic participation, hamstrung by the problems of any small city subject to state mandates but with limited authority to govern. Salinas offers a laboratory for change, and many in the city are eager to seize that opportunity, though they often struggle to find the path. Salinas has a strong tradition of civic activism and organizing in the face of adversity — and a corps of committed residents who could live elsewhere yet choose to stay and help their city move forward.

THE MAKING OF SALINAS

Salinas was incorporated in 1874, soon after the Southern Pacific arrived, and became the Monterey County seat. By the end of the century, Claude Spreckels had built the country’s largest sugar mill, created what would become the model of a plantation town, and imported hundreds of Japanese workers to cultivate sugar beets. By 1920, lettuce had superseded beets.
as the primary crop, and Filipinos replaced the Japanese. Agriculture proved so lucrative an industry that in 1924, with a population of fewer than 4,500, Salinas ranked highest in the country of any city for per capita wealth.

In 1963, the city annexed the Alisal, a large community on the east side of Salinas that had been home to Okies during the Dust Bowl and successive generations of struggling migrants. The annexation doubled the city’s size and ushered in decades of growth. By 1970, Salinas was a city of 59,000, occupying 23 square miles at the northern end of the 90-mile long Salinas Valley. The city grew more than 30 percent in population each decade through the end of the century. New upscale subdivisions to the north/northeast increased scarce housing stock and drew commuters from San Jose, where housing prices were already soaring. Revisiting his hometown in the 1960s, Steinbeck wrote: “I felt resentment toward the strangers swamping what I thought of as my country with noise and clutter and the inevitable rings of junk.”

Growth since 2000 has slowed to low single digits. Today, about 156,000 people live in Salinas, making it the state’s 34th largest city. Throughout this century, the age distribution has remained relatively constant, and very young: A median age of less than 29, with almost one-third of the population under 18.

The city has been majority Hispanic for at least 25 years. The shift came officially in the 1990 census, when Hispanics topped 50 percent and whites were 38 percent, an exact transposition of the ratio from a decade earlier. The most recent surveys indicate more than three-quarters of the residents are Hispanic. The remainder of the city is primarily non-Hispanic white (15 percent), with 6 percent Asian and 2 percent black.

Thirty-seven percent of Salinas residents are foreign born (10 points higher than the state average), and almost 70 percent speak a language other than English at home (for the great majority, that language is Spanish). The percentage of foreign-born has been consistent since 2000, though the share speaking Spanish at home has increased. The overwhelming majority are Mexican nationals. Many recent immigrants in the Salinas Valley are indigenous, from southern Mexican states, creating additional linguistic challenges because they speak Mixtec, Triqui, and other indigenous languages, not Spanish.

By any measure, residents are struggling financially. Median household income is about 80 percent of the state average and declined slightly between 2010 and 2013. The average household is larger than the state norm, driving per capita income down even further. More than a fifth of the population lives below the poverty level.

Young people face particular hardship. In the most recent census survey, one out of four families with children under 18 reported falling below the poverty level in the past year. The Public Policy Institute of California estimated that Salinas and its surrounding communities in Monterey and San Benito Counties had the highest child poverty rate in California, more than 32 percent. In the Salinas City Elementary School District, 80 percent qualified for free lunch and one-third reported being homeless (with no permanent home) at some point in the past year.
While income distribution varies widely by neighborhood — with poverty rates as high as 40 percent in parts of East Salinas — statistics on educational attainment are fairly consistent across the city. Almost 40 percent of adults over 25 did not complete high school, twice the statewide average. Only 8.6 percent have bachelor’s degrees, half the statewide average. And only 3.8 percent have graduate degrees, compared to 11.2 percent statewide.

*Downtown Salinas still boasts many of the Art Deco and Art Moderne buildings constructed in the 1930s. The city’s Historic Resources Board put out [this guide](#) — photos, map and walking tour — to notable buildings.*
Included are some of the 10 sites on the National Historic Register; Salinas has eight houses listed, most dating from around the turn of the century, including John Steinbeck’s childhood home, as well as the county jail and courthouse.

The Monterey Courthouse, now on the National Historic Register, was begun in 1936.

YOUTH AND EDUCATION

Salinas is one of several smaller cities in California that stand out for their youthful populations in a rapidly aging state. Perhaps no California city lavishes so much public attention on its own youth. Calls to better serve youth, give youth something to do, and keep youth safe are staples of civic conversation. Local governments churn out reports about youth safety and services.

The impact of all this conversation remains nebulous. Forbes recently offended the town by labeling it the “second least educated” city in the U.S., based on a Wallethub study that factored in educational attainment, doctors per capita, and local institutions. The methodology might be questionable, but the educational statistics are sobering.
Not only are the rates of educational attainment half the state average. Typically, younger people are more likely to have bachelor’s degree in California; in Salinas, that pattern is reversed. Salinas’ older residents are its best educated.

The challenge for Salinas schools is to reverse this trend and become forces for upward mobility.

Educational Attainment of People in Salinas, California in 2009–2013

Source: American Community Survey

Anecdotally, there are signs of progress, and residents are often most optimistic when discussing their public schools. Many area schools have embraced AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), the largest and most successful preparatory college program in the country. Gifted and Talented Education (GATE) programs also have a strong presence. A new cadre of young teachers and principals, many of them recent college graduates who grew up in Salinas, has returned home and is replacing Baby Boomer generation teachers.

The numbers suggest they have their work cut out for them. In 2013, under the old Academic Performance Index, most Salinas-area schools failed to meet achievement goals, and some saw declines in their numbers. In the first year of testing under the new Common Core math and English standards, only three of the 55 public schools with Salinas mailing addresses met or exceeded the state’s already low averages.

Graduation rates look healthy at the high schools — 92.6 percent at Alvarez, 89.5 percent at North Salinas, 92.3 percent at Alisal, 81.4 percent at Salinas High School — and the dropout rate is low at 7.4 percent. But those numbers may be deceptively high because dropout risks are transferred to a remediation school, which has a graduation rate of 64 percent. And Salinas high schools need to produce far more graduates who are ready for college. In the most recent
statistics, only 31.5 percent of graduates met requirements for UC or CSU (the state average is 41.9 percent).

Higher education institutions in and around Salinas are making innovative efforts to improve outcomes. Hartnell College in Salinas is the top community college in the state at transferring underrepresented minority students to the University of California, according to the UC’s own numbers, released this spring. Hartnell has won national honors, most recently from the White House for several programs deemed “Bright Spots in Hispanic Education.” Hartnell runs a NASA-funded Science, Engineering, Mathematics and Aerospace Academy — the only one in California — that offers afterschool and summer workshops for K–12 students, to inspire more minorities to enter STEM fields.

California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), on the Fort Ord property less than a 10-minute drive from Salinas, has been encouraging more children in Salinas to prepare and apply for college. The university helped organize a Bright Futures initiative, which includes local education, social service, business and philanthropic groups, to focus on improvements in elementary school and even in early childhood. A “University Promise” program brings local sixth graders to campus to meet students and staff; the university promises to save a spot for students and to arrange financial aid when they reach college age, and the students promise to complete high school and meet other requirements.

The university, which is completing a deal to acquire the National Steinbeck Center in downtown Salinas, intends to make that a facility for degree completion programs.

ECONOMY AND WORK FORCE

In a recent commentary, Katharine Ball, an editor at the Salinas Californian (which just cut back to printing the paper three days a week), compared the region’s economy to an open-faced triple-layer sandwich: A very thin layer of extreme wealth on top, another thin layer of fragile middle class under that, all balanced on a thick third layer of working poor who support the region’s twin economic pillars, agriculture and tourism.

Agriculture, historically an economic, political, and philanthropic engine for the region, remains the largest sector of the economy, employing one-fifth of the approximately 62,700 Salinas adults who reported working in the most recent census surveys. The percentage working in agriculture has increased in the last decade, and even that number is probably artificially low; the number of farmworkers is almost impossible to assess accurately because of undocumented status, language barriers, seasonal work patterns, immigration, and the difficulty of surveying workers.

The value of crops grown in Monterey County reached a record $4.5 billion in 2014, a 6.5 percent increase over the record-breaking numbers of the prior year. Lettuce and strawberries regularly vie for the most-valuable crop; last year lettuce came in first at $775 million, passing strawberries at $710 million. Lemons, cabbage, kale and parsley were among the 26 other crops that exceeded $10 million in value.
For farmworkers, the equation is a little different. The median income for Salinas residents working in agriculture in 2013 was $16,577. There have been indications recently that a tighter border and an improving economy both here and in Mexico are creating labor shortages in the fields, which may push wages higher. Even then, the seasonal nature of farm work (and a system that relies on labor contractors who function as middle-men) helps explain why incomes remain so low. In the most recent data, fewer than half of employed Salinas residents reported working year-round. Almost a quarter said they worked fewer than 40 weeks a year.

The tourism industry on the peninsula, which also relies on workers from Salinas, was a $2.3 billion annual business in 2013 that employed 22,000 people full-time. But much of the work is part-time, seasonal, and outside Salinas. Of Monterey County’s 252 lodging properties, 210 are outside Salinas and more than 9,500 of the 12,000 hotel rooms are on the peninsula.

Three other major sectors of the economy are education/health care jobs (18 percent of the work force), government (15 percent), and retail (11 percent). Public administration jobs and health care, a growing sector, pay some of the highest median wages. Incomes remain relatively low, however, because many in the professional class who work in Salinas choose to live outside the city. Single-family home communities, hidden from the road and sometimes behind walls, have grown so fast along California Highway 68, the road to Monterey, that the Californian publishes a features section called “Off 68.”
### Median Earnings for selected professions, 2013

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Profession</th>
<th>No. of Workers</th>
<th>Median Earnings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>13,178</td>
<td>$16,577</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction</td>
<td>3,374</td>
<td>$32,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manufacturing</td>
<td>3,496</td>
<td>$29,978</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retail trade</td>
<td>6,953</td>
<td>$20,545</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prof/Scientific/Mgmt.</td>
<td>4,921</td>
<td>$25,462</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educational Services</td>
<td>4,194</td>
<td>$37,646</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care/Social Assistance</td>
<td>7,322</td>
<td>$30,572</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation/Food Services</td>
<td>4,098</td>
<td>$14,618</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other services</td>
<td>3,343</td>
<td>$22,263</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Administration</td>
<td>3,405</td>
<td>$55,869</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Employed over 16 yrs. old</td>
<td>62,720</td>
<td>$24,433</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: U.S. Census

Commuting to work poses challenges for the working poor, too. Farmworkers rely on “raiteros,” their own long-standing form of Uber. Fewer than 1 percent of workers in Salinas commute by public transit (compared to 5.2 percent statewide), reflecting a system that offers largely inefficient options. To reach the hospital from East Salinas requires two transfers and takes so long that people walk the two miles; mothers pushing strollers along the uphill street that leads to the hospital are a common sight. To travel from downtown Salinas to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, less than 20 miles, takes an hour and 15 minutes. Connections to the Bay Area are also limited; Caltrain, the Bay Area commuter line, has so far refused to extend lines further south than Gilroy, 27 miles north of Salinas.

Extending the rail line has been one of the keystones of the city’s economic development plan, which also calls for a Steinbeck Innovation Cluster that would help the city leverage its dominance in agriculture to become a leader in “Ag Tech.” The program envisions partnerships between entrepreneurial training and existing tech programs for youth, producing start-ups that would apply cutting-edge technology in the fields and factories.

Some area employers voice frustration at the difficulty in filling more skilled jobs with local workers. There are small-scale efforts to correct the historic mismatch between employer needs and education/training of the work force, and to groom candidates for higher-paying jobs in technology. One of the most innovative projects is a recent collaboration between Hartnell College and CSUMB. The colleges’ joint venture, called CSIT-in-3, enrolled its first class two years ago in an intensive program through which Hartnell students can earn a bachelor’s degree in computer science in three years. Of the 94 students currently in the program, more than 40 percent are women, more than 80 percent are Latino, and 80 percent are first generation college students.
The James Irvine Foundation

The pilot program illustrates another cornerstone of Salinas: Major philanthropic efforts have generally been funded by growers. In this case, the Matsui Foundation, which had provided $500 million in scholarships for farmworkers’ children since 2004, chose to fund the more targeted, long-term effort embodied in CSIT-in-3. The foundation, established by Matsui Nurseries, one of the largest orchid growers in the country, provides scholarships of up to $30,000 to each student in CSIT-in-3. (You can read more about CSIT in the sidebar, “Out of the Fields, Into Academia” later in this report).

QUALITY OF LIFE, HOUSING

Salinas offers tranquil landscapes and some of the state’s most beautiful weather, but finding places to enjoy the outdoors often requires leaving the city. Surrounded by majestic public spaces, Salinas has one of the lowest ratios of parkland per resident in California — less than 3 acres per 1,000 residents, compared to more than 16 acres per 1,000 in nearby San Jose. A years-long effort to turn the drained lakebed known as Carr Lake into a signature, 500-acre park has widespread popular and government support (in part because it also would collect storm water, recharge groundwater, and improve water quality in Monterey Bay). But Salinas has been unable to acquire the land from the families who farm it.

Other ambitious efforts to increase civic arts and recreational opportunities have similarly faltered financially, a combination of management failures and lack of public support. The city built a swimming pool complex — but ended up turning it over to a private club. A public golf course was transferred to a nonprofit. A performing arts center is now occupied by a charter school. In the most high profile saga, the National Steinbeck Center has been at the center of a long-running civic drama, fighting to stay open. Established initially, and supported throughout the years, with grants from the agricultural community, the center was never able to become financially solvent or repay a redevelopment loan. It failed to meet unrealistic projections for attendance, fell into debt and foreclosure, and is now being taken over by California State University Monterey Bay.

The premium on land, which makes parks and recreation difficult, has even more dire consequences for housing.

Its geography renders Salinas one of the most difficult places to find an affordable place to live, and the situation has been worsening in and around the city. The percentage of homes in Monterey County that are affordable, relative to residents’ median household income, declined from nearly 50 percent in 2011 to 27 percent at the end of last year. Salinas has seen the sharpest increases in housing prices in the county — even as incomes remained stagnant.

The majority of people in Salinas rent (57 percent), and they face an even worse situation: Various indexes place Salinas among the least affordable cities in the United States. The average rent for a two-bedroom apartment in Salinas last year was more than in the cities of Seattle or Miami, and the average renter in Salinas would need to work nearly two full-time jobs to afford the average rent. The result: It is routine in Salinas to see multiple families
sharing apartments or homes. More than 10 percent of the population lives in homes with seven or more people.

This squeeze is most evident in East Salinas, which has more than 11,000 residents per square mile; Salinas as a whole has a population density of a little under 7,000 per square mile, the same as the city of Los Angeles. Conditions of rental housing are often poor. Farmworker housing is particularly scarce, and conditions in labor camps across the Salinas Valley are reminiscent of Steinbeck’s vivid descriptions.

Lately, developers and others have tried to carve out spaces to make Salinas living a little more pleasant. One of the best-covered stories in town has been a year-long bid to create a small park with a basketball court in Acosta Plaza, a 305-condominium development. Constructed in the 1970s, Acosta Plaza has become rental apartments for low-wage workers and developed a reputation as one of the toughest neighborhoods in Salinas.

Young people from inside and outside the neighborhood organized a group called Youth for Change, interviewed residents about their needs, and then organized around creating the community space. They also helped clean up Acosta Plaza, did pre-construction work for the new park, and raised nearly $100,000. More than a year after their efforts launched, the project has won approvals, but hasn’t been built. Youth for Change plans to push for a larger community center as its next project. (You can see Rocio Martinez, one of the high school students in Youth for Change, discuss this organizing work in this video.)
CRIME

Despite years of efforts — everything from granny brigades to military intervention — high crime rates continue to pose a problem for Salinas, both in reality, and in perception.

Here again geography plays a key role. Salinas is a crossroads where north meets south — for Californians and especially for gang members. Northern gangs, in particular Nuestra Familia, which has been headquartered there, have battled over Salinas with Southern California gangs, chiefly the Mexican Mafia.

There are perhaps 3,000 gang members in the city of 156,000 — in part because of the high number of disconnected youth. In East Salinas, many young people are left alone while parents work in the fields for long hours or work multiple jobs to meet the high cost of living. Too few students qualify for college financial aid, and many see a future with few options other than service work, the fields, or gangs.

Salinas has tried almost everything — task forces, special units, gang summits, cease-fires, pray-ins, even military veterans using counter-insurgency theories. The city was the first in California to develop and refine a violence prevention plan and has built a coalition among more than 60 local institutions — from government agencies to neighborhood associations — to collaborate on reducing violence. Violent crime and many youth violence statistics have declined in the past few years, yet homicide remains high.

Almost all the homicide victims are Latinos, most quite young; sometimes children are killed in crossfire or from stray bullets. The youth homicide rate per 100,000 residents has been the highest among California cities for three of the last four years. The shooting death of a high school football star in early September was the 22nd homicide in 2015, putting the city on pace to break its record number of 29 in 2009. Such figures give the city a homicide rate more than twice that of Los Angeles. Small neighboring cities in the Salinas Valley, like King City and Greenfield, are even more violent on a per capita basis.

Salinas’ police department is badly understaffed, and consistently reports officer-per-resident ratios well below national averages. Police Chief Kelly McMillin recently disbanded special units, including those devoted to gangs, because the department did not have enough officers to patrol and conduct investigations. McMillin told the Washington Post last year that, on average, 11 cops patrolled the city during day shifts and total staff dipped to 130 sworn officers.

Simply finding police officers has been a challenge, in part because of the high cost of housing and more attractive jobs in nearby departments. “The pool of qualified police applicants out there is utterly dismal. We’re struggling to find good cops of any race,” McMillin said last year. “We’ve lost 25 percent of our sworn staff since the recession, in a department that was desperately understaffed at our highest, facing a community plagued by violence.”

The city has had to suspend promising programs not for lack of funds, but lack of officers. A successful grant-funded collaboration in the Hebbron Heights section of East Salinas between two Salinas police officers, community leaders, school counselors, the families of young gang
members, and professionals with the safety alliance CASP was shut down because of a lack of police manpower.

Coverage of crime in the local media exacerbates perception problems. A recent study of TV news in Salinas, which has two network-affiliated stations, found that more than 46 percent of news stories were crime-related, with gang violence featured daily. Latinos were overrepresented as perpetrators and underrepresented as victims, and TV news often asked the audience to take an active role in “catching criminals,” with segments like “Manhunt Mondays,” according to the study by American University professor Carolyn Brown, a documentary filmmaker.

Almost everyone is touched by the problem, in some ways more by the perception than the reality. Though the vast majority of young people are not involved in gangs, the reputation of Salinas youth as “gangsters” has repercussions even for the most successful. Arismel Tena, a Salinas High graduate now attending UC Berkeley, wrote recently that she often saw classmates who got in trouble written off. “The ‘gangster’ label carries a stigma, and, as a kid in Salinas, you can see and feel that judgment as a rationale for not investing in you.”

HEALTH
In some ways, health is a bright spot in Salinas. The last major assessment of community health, released by Monterey County in 2013, found some good news: decreased smoking rates, big declines in deaths from stroke and heart disease, and decreased overall mortality rates from diabetes. But the assessment also found large health disparities between Latinos and non-Hispanic whites in cancer screening, teen pregnancy rates, diabetes mortality and obesity.

Childhood obesity, a focus of national attention, is particularly acute in Salinas, an irony in a region that produces such an abundance of healthy vegetables and fruits. Salinas had a 47 percent childhood obesity rate in a study of fifth, seventh, and ninth graders — almost three times the rate in a recent study that estimated 16 percent of California adolescents were obese.

The highest-profile health issue in Salinas recently involves the potential impact of pesticides on schoolchildren. A state report released in 2014 showed that Monterey County had the highest percentage of schools in the state within a quarter mile of places where pesticides are used in high concentrations — 137 schools in the county, many in Salinas.

Parents and teachers have organized protests (sometimes wearing gas masks), demanding the release and collection of more data on the problem. The controversy has prompted action to establish stronger buffer zones around schools where pesticides could not be used.

POLITICAL POWER AND CIVIC PARTICIPATION
Given the demographics of Salinas, it is not surprising that only one-third of its residents are registered to vote. One-third are under 18. More than one-third are foreign born, and only 22.7 percent of those are naturalized citizens (less than half the statewide rate). And a significant number are undocumented, one of the highest concentrations in the state. Those
statistics add up to an equation that leaves political power largely in the hands of those who have run the city for many generations, reinforcing a large disconnect between the power brokers and the majority of the city’s residents.

Among registered voters, turnout is far below the state average and lags particularly in the poorer areas of the city. In both the last presidential election year and the last local election year, turnout in Salinas was 10 points below the state average. Despite a mayoral contest in 2014, only 17,550 people voted in Salinas. In the higher income area in the north of the city, however, turnout was 20 points higher than in the East Salinas area.

Like similar cities in California, Salinas is frustrated by its limited ability to raise revenue and control its own destiny. It has a weak mayor form of government that vests most decision-making power in the appointed city manager. Facing legal challenges, Salinas adopted a district election system in 1988 (by only 103 votes), and the first Latino city council member was elected the following year. Anna Caballero, who had worked as a farmworker advocate and lawyer, became the first female and the first Hispanic mayor in 1998. Her successors in City Hall have been white men.

In some ways, those who are officially disenfranchised are the most visibly civically engaged, as they struggle to affect public policy through grassroots efforts and community organizing. A balkanized city — the Alisal is separated from the rest of Salinas by Highway 101 — has led in some places to greater neighborhood identification. The Alisal, home for successive generations of immigrants and working poor, has the lowest income levels and highest crime rates, but the neighborhood has a strong identity, a thriving business district, and a vibrant arts scene. (See this short video on the Alisal Center for the Fine Arts)
Salinas was the heart of Cesar Chavez’s farm worker movement in its days of greatest strength, primarily the 1970s, a decade bookended by two of the largest strikes in agricultural history. The strong presence of the United Farm Workers at that time galvanized a generation, and the tradition of social activism and engagement still resonates with veterans of the movement and their families. Several nonprofit organizations, including the Center for Community Advocacy and California Rural Legal Assistance, grew out of the movement and have provided direct assistance to communities as well as serving as training grounds for a new generation of potential leaders.

The strikes, marches, and protests of the 1970s and 80s also polarized Salinas, and the legacy of those divisions remains. The presence of a small Latino middle and professional class, including elected and appointed officials, has changed the political and social dynamic, as has the passage of time. But underlying tensions persist. The polarization surfaced in a recent debate over a proposed farmworker housing complex in Spreckels, the community just south of the city limits that housed the first sugar plantation.

Growers facing labor shortages have sought permission to import more guest workers under the federal H2 program, which requires employers to provide housing. Tanimura & Antle, one of the largest growers, proposed building a dormitory-style complex of 100 two-bedroom units on land the company owns in Spreckels. The plan includes recreation and amenities and T&A estimates each unit would house eight workers — which would double the population of Spreckels. The plan received county approval this summer only after angry opposition, some of it racially charged.
FUTURE OUTLOOK
Salinas has demonstrated an ability to turn crises into opportunities.

When the libraries nearly shut down for lack of funds in 2005, they were rescued by local fundraising and a vote to raise a dedicated sales tax. The libraries not only stayed open, they expanded, became community centers, and attracted a friends group that has become a visible, imaginative civic force: They pioneered mobile paleritos, or ice cream carts, that move around the city dispensing books and library cards and providing mobile Wi-Fi hot spots.

That sort of creativity and determination will have to overcome the other history in Salinas: good intentions that falter, promising projects left half-finished.

The reasons to hope for Salinas’ future center on two things. The first is the geography, which offers opportunities despite sometimes seeming like a jinx. Can Salinas capitalize on its own strengths and grow by building stronger ties to prosperous neighboring regions?

The second reason for hope is its young people. The more first-generation college — and high school — graduates that Salinas can produce, the better the chance more Salinas residents can rise into the middle class. Immigrant parents are often the most passionately committed to providing their children with the education they lack; with clearer pathways, could immigrant families integrate and move up, lifting Salinas with them? Could innovative programs in schools and in the local universities make a significant difference?
There is energy on the streets of Salinas. East Salinas’s arts and theater scene is vibrant, and its retail bustles. There’s new investment downtown, anchored by a new headquarters for Taylor Farms, with retail and restaurants on the first two floors. Next door, the National Steinbeck Center is financially stable for the first time and its new director is committed to charting a course that ensures it becomes not only an extension of CSUMB but also a cultural resource relevant to the Salinas community. Restaurants and bars are staying open later.

Yet, the challenges to reaching a better future for Salinas loom large. Many of the city’s problems stem from forces beyond its control — the nearby prison in Soledad, gang feuds in the state, the statewide challenges of building affordable housing, a California governing system that puts a straitjacket on local governance. The programs and efforts to improve Salinas are numerous, but small; the poverty is entrenched and the jobs are low-wage. Climate change and the drought are creating more pressure on the always fragile world of agriculture, upon which Salinas depends.

Salinas needs a critical mass of educated young people and success stories to overcome the outside world’s negative perceptions, because those perceptions shape reality. They can make it more difficult to attract talent to Salinas, and aspiring, accomplished young people from Salinas seeking opportunities face the added hurdle of preconceived ideas and low expectations.

It’s possible to envision far better futures for Salinas. To a large extent, it will be up to the young people of Salinas to chart that course. A new generation will have to mature into leaders who can turn energy, commitment, and innovative ideas into lasting change.
APPENDIX: OUT OF THE FIELDS, INTO ACADEMIA

Alonso Mendoza, a graduate of Alisal High School, is the first in his family to go to college. He is a student in CSIT-in-3, a nationally recognized collaboration between Hartnell College and CSUMB, which awards bachelor’s degrees in computer technology in three years.

“My dad came here when he was 15 years old and he started working in the fields then, and he still is. For the past four summers or so, whenever I’m out of school, I’ve worked in the fields to see what my dad does every day and appreciate what our parents do for us. I worked in the lettuce fields, cutting lettuce, and it’s nonstop for eight, 10, 12 hours a day. When I would get home, I would go into my room, lay down on the floor, and just crash out. I don’t know how my dad does this, every day.”

Alonso wants to set an example for his two younger brothers, to encourage them to study hard in school.

“Here in Salinas, especially on the East Side where most of the population is Latino, people get the impression that most of us are gangsters, shooting, you know. But that’s such a small percentage of the population here … most of us are so willing in our life to study, to get further in our education.”
“My parents stressed to us each and every single day, ‘Look, you don’t study, you know what’s waiting for you here in Salinas. There’s no other job than in the fields. We’re giving you the opportunity to study.”

Like all 90 students in the program, he received a $30,000 scholarship from a foundation established by Andy Matsui, founder and president of Matsui Nursery.

APPENDIX: SALINAS TIMELINE

1872 – Southern Pacific arrives in Salinas; city becomes the county seat

1897 – Claude Spreckels builds world’s largest sugar beet processing plant; establishes a town and company-owned farms, and employs hundreds of Chinese and Japanese workers

1911 – First Rodeo is held.

1915 – Highway 101 is built; Salinas has paved streets

1920s – Lettuce replaces beets as major crop when iced rail cars make it possible to ship vegetables. Artichokes appear.

1921 – Architect Ralph Wyckoff designs Salinas High School, part of a burst of Art Moderne and Art Deco buildings.
1924 – Salinas has the highest per capita income of any city in the country
1928 – Salinas airport opens
1930s – Dust bowl migrants settle in the Alisal; strikes and labor strife in the fields
1936 – Bitter and violent lettuce strike.
1936 – Monterey Court House begun with sculpted heads by Jo Mora.

1939 – Grapes of Wrath is published.
1942 – Braceros arrive, Mexican guestworkers recruited as wartime replacements

   3,586 Japanese from Salinas and surrounding areas, including 46 SHS seniors, detained in Rodeo grounds before transfer to internment camps

1948 – Marilyn Monroe is crowned first Artichoke Queen and visits Salinas jeweler to promote diamond sales.
1948 – Salinas Junior College becomes Hartnell
1950s – Population is 13,917; over the decade Salinas annexes 43 areas, doubling in size

Refrigeration cars put shed workers out of work
1953 – Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital opens, hub of new health care industry
1956 – Valley Center shopping becomes destination mall for the region, anchoring expansion of industry and retail jobs
1959 – Salinas has disposable household income of $6,523, above the national average of $6,082.

1960s – Decade of growth sees three new high schools, two libraries, and City Hall. Industries expand, including Firestone, Peter Paul, Nestle

1962 – Steinbeck awarded Nobel Prize

1963 – Accident just south of Salinas in Chualar kills 28 braceros and draws national attention to problems with guestworker program

1963 – Alisal is incorporated as East Salinas, doubling the city’s population

1970s – East Salinas residents complain about lack of parks and services.

Homelessness becomes a concern; survey shows 50 people on average living in street or cars.

Labor strife and rise of the UFW polarize the valley.

1970 – Largest lettuce strike in history after growers sign sweetheart contracts with Teamsters. Chavez released after 20 days in the Monterey County jail in Salinas for refusing to call off a lettuce boycott.

1972 – Northridge Shopping Center opens; has lasting impact on struggling downtown business district
1979 – Bitter lettuce strike ends after seven months with record wages for UFW workers. Gov. Jerry Brown appears at rallies with Chavez and the farmworkers.

1980s – Widespread plant closures including Firestone, which becomes a Superfund site.

Almost half the population of 80,479 is Hispanic, largely Mexican American.

1988 – Voters approve, by 103 votes, plan to switch to district city council elections.

1989 – Simon Salinas is first Mexican American elected to city council.

1989 – $10 million worth of damage from the Loma Prieta earthquake

1990 – Population is more than half Hispanic

1996 – President Clinton goes to Salinas to applaud city’s efforts to curb gang violence, a problem that exacerbated with splits between rival gangs.

1998 – Anna Caballero becomes city’s first female and Latino mayor

1998 – National Steinbeck Center opens on Main Street

2000 – Census reports 151,060.

2005 – Maya Cinemas open on Main Street, part of efforts to revitalize downtown

2005 – Loss in revenues threatens to shut Salinas libraries; fundraising campaign keeps them open limited hours till residents pass a dedicated tax hike

2009 – Salinas Valley Memorial Hospital is sixth largest employer in Salinas with 2,200 workers

2015 – Salinas supplies 80 percent of the country’s lettuce and artichokes, among other crops.
APPENDIX: ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Joe Mathews** is California and Innovation editor for Zócalo Public Square. He writes the syndicated Connecting California column for Zócalo and 30 media outlets around California.

Joe is co-author, with Mark Paul, of *California Crackup: How Reform Broke the Golden State and How We Can Fix It* (University of California Press, 2010). His previous book was *The People’s Machine: Arnold Schwarzenegger and the Rise of Blockbuster Democracy* (PublicAffairs, 2006), an account of Governor Schwarzenegger’s first term and his use of ballot measures as governing tools.

Joe also serves as a professor of practice at Arizona State University, as fellow at ASU’s Center for Social Cohesion, and as co-president, with Bruno Kaufmann, of the Global Forum on Modern Direct Democracy — which brings together academics, journalists, activists and other experts on initiative, referenda, and new forms of deliberative and participatory democracy.

Formerly a reporter at the *Los Angeles Times, Wall Street Journal*, and *Baltimore Sun*, Joe has also served as Irvine senior fellow at the New America Foundation; as storyteller of the multi-stakeholder process known as the Delta Dialogues; as a contributing writer at *The Los Angeles Times*; as a blogger at Fox & Hounds Daily and NBC’s Prop Zero; and as radio and TV commentator on all things California.

Joe lives in the San Gabriel Valley with his wife and three young sons.

**Miriam Pawel** is an author, journalist, and independent scholar who has spent the last decade researching and writing about agriculture, the United Farm Workers, and Cesar Chavez. Her most recent work is *The Crusades of Cesar Chavez*, the first biography of the founder of the United Farm Workers, which was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle award and winner of a California Book Award gold medal and the Robert F. Kennedy Book Prize. Her previous book, *The Union of Their Dreams – Power, Hope and Struggle in Cesar Chavez’s Farm Worker Movement*, was a groundbreaking narrative history told through eight participants in the movement.

Prior to writing books, Miriam spent 25 years as a reporter and editor at *Newsday* and the *Los Angeles Times*. She continues to contribute to the *Los Angeles Times* op-ed pages and also is a frequent contributor to Zócalo Public Square.

She has been a fellow at the Alicia Patterson Foundation and a John Jacobs fellow at the Berkeley Institute of Governmental Studies and was awarded a National Endowment for the Humanities Fellowship to complete her work on the Chavez biography.

Miriam is a native New Yorker who has lived for the last 15 years in Pasadena.