

The Big Tech Utopia In California Is Financed By Foreigners And Promoted By Silicon Valley Douche Bags

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Everyone knows that Chinese billionaires hide their money in tony California suburbs like Hillsdale and Atherton, California but here is a surprise.

The Secret Foreign Roots of Tech Titans' New California City



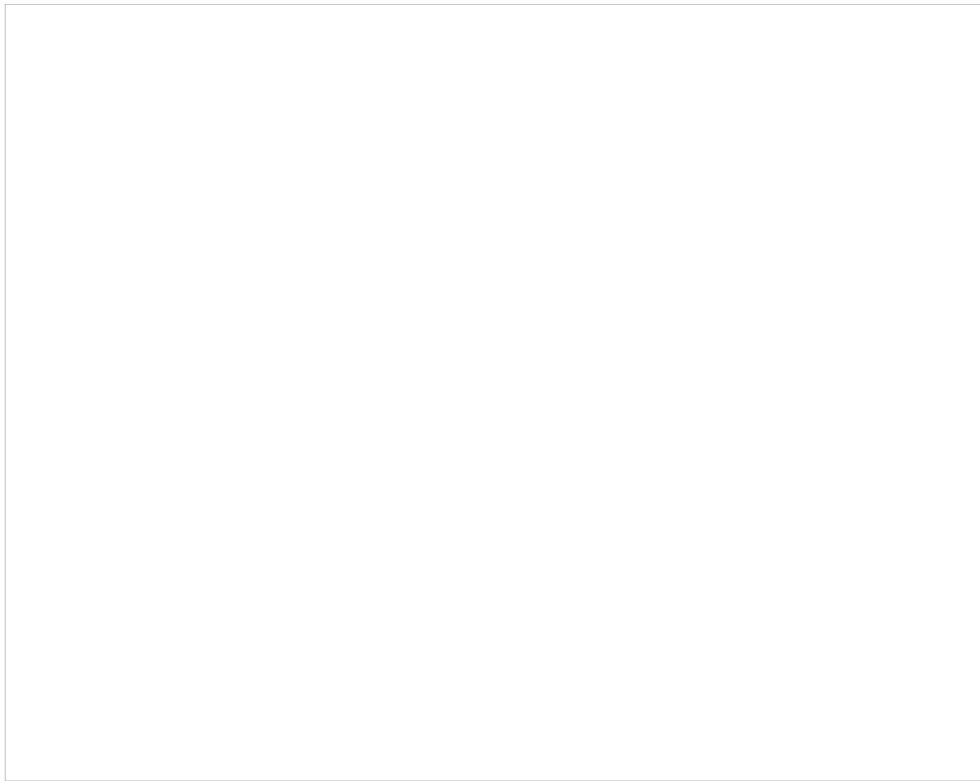
Silicon Valley investors' plans for a new city near a military base were hatched by a pair of foreign nationals



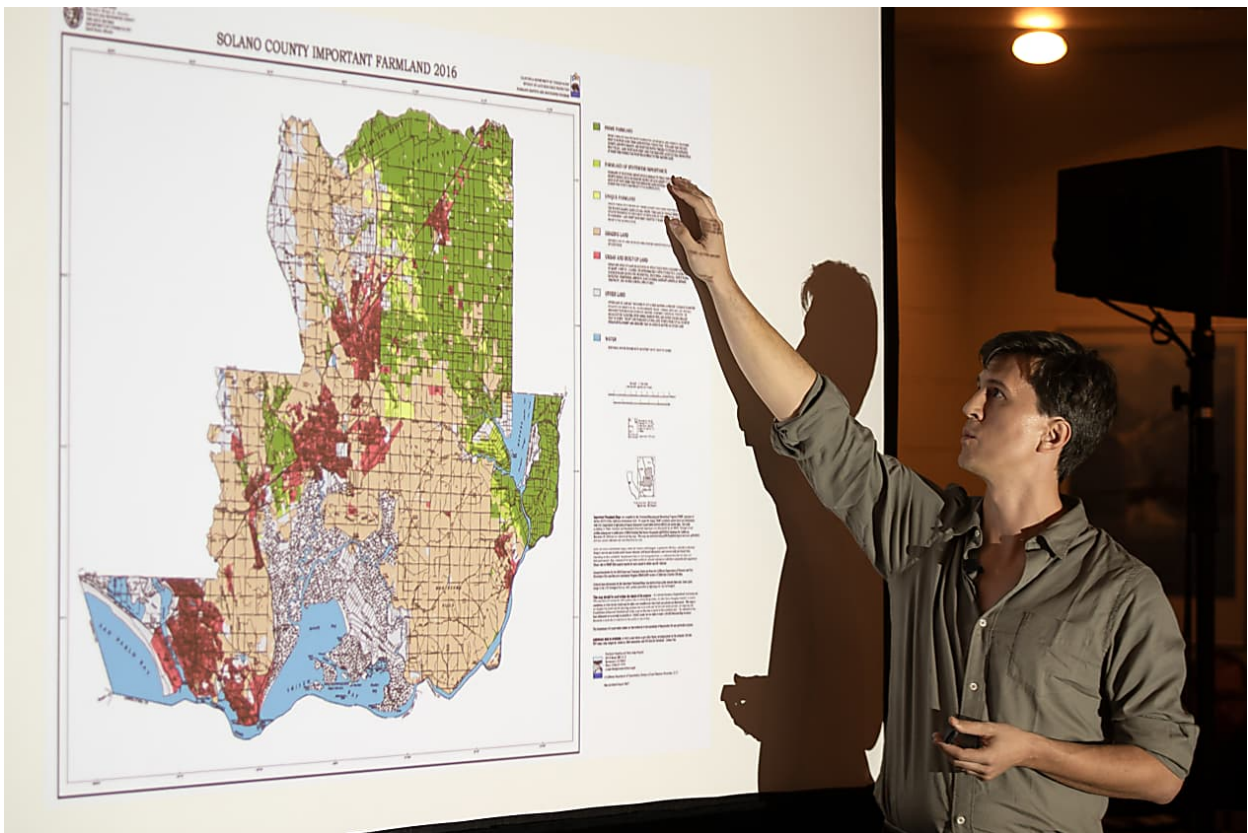
When the backers of a secretive effort to amass nearly \$1 billion worth of land in California finally [unveiled their vision](#) this past summer, they did so in great detail. They announced plans to build a new city near San Francisco. They listed the Silicon Valley titans involved.

California Forever, as the project was called, described itself as “a California company backed by California investors.”

What California Forever didn't highlight was its foreign roots. Its creator is a Czech-born entrepreneur who became an American citizen midway into the land-buying venture. His right-hand man in the project for much of the time is South African.



Foreign involvement in deals like California Forever's is a potential trigger for a U.S. government [national security review](#), and Jan Sramek, a former Goldman Sachs trader, and Thomas Mather, who manages investments for the family of a South African billionaire, took steps to play down their central roles, according to a Wall Street Journal review of legal documents, property and corporate records, publicly available data and interviews with people involved.

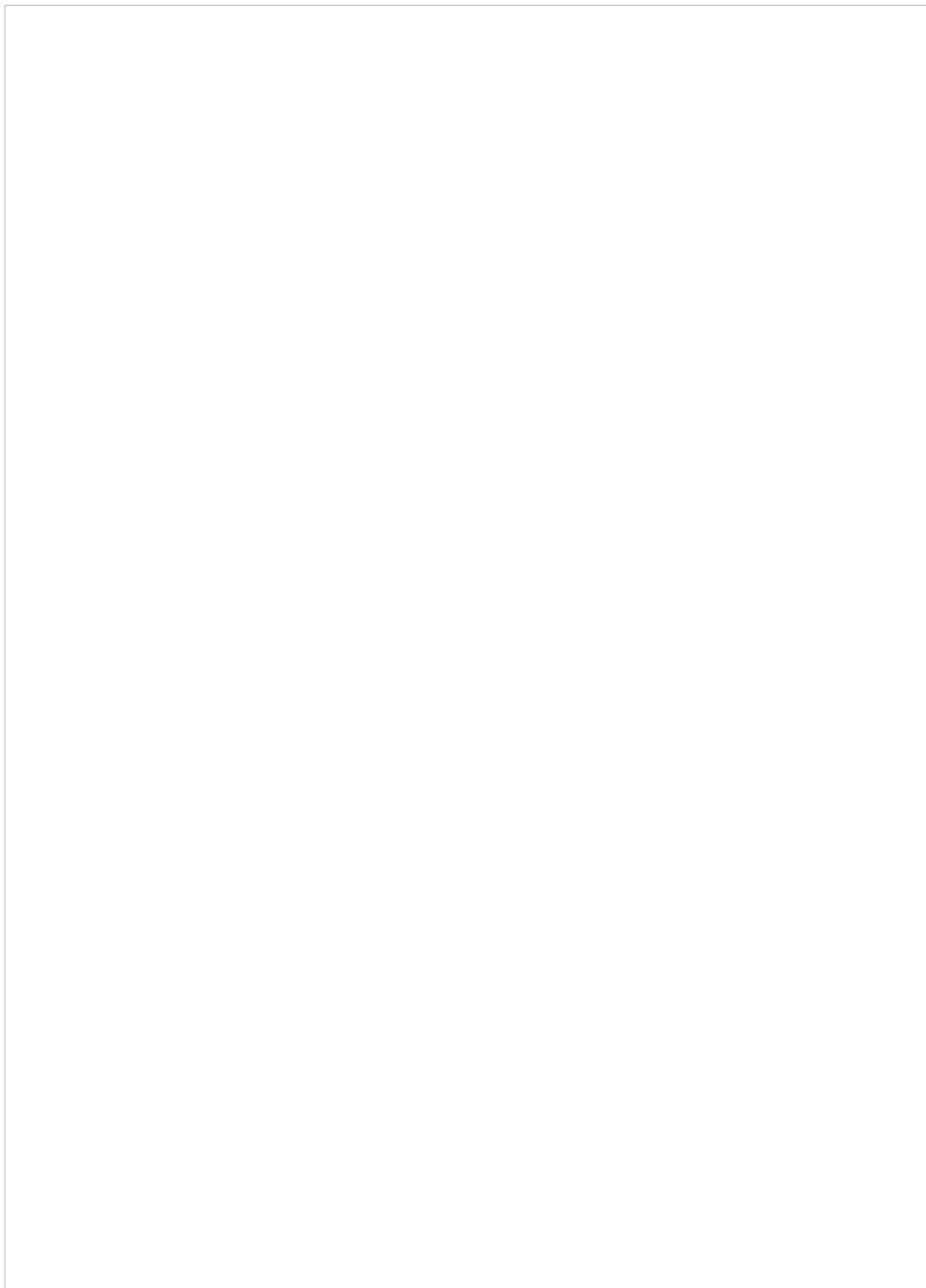


California Forever founder Jan Sramek giving a presentation during a recent town hall in Rio Vista, Calif., to get public input on the proposed development. Photo: D. Ross Cameron

During a five-year, [under-the-radar buying spree](#), a company Sramek set up became the largest landowner in California's Solano County while concealing the identities of the investors. Parcels snapped up included land surrounding Travis Air Force Base, a hub for the U.S. military's Pacific operations.

The land-buying drew scrutiny from landowners, federal and local officials and Air Force investigators, who questioned the lack of transparency, especially over the identities of its backers.

The Committee on Foreign Investment in the U.S., the [multiagency panel known as Cfius](#) that conducts national security reviews of deals, contacted California Forever at the end of 2022, asking for proof that its funds come from America, and the group complied, Sramek said.



The panel hasn't opened a formal investigation. Such a step would allow Cfius to request more information about the venture and potentially enable the government to amend the deal, for example, by compelling California Forever to sign security guarantees to protect the area around Travis.

□

Note: county data is as of Oct. 31 from the Solano County assessor
Source: Solano County property records

Brian McGill and Jack Gillum/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

The Treasury Department, which leads Cfius, declined to comment on California Forever. Rep. Mike Thompson, a Democrat whose district covers part of Solano, said Treasury Secretary Janet Yellen told him in July that "there's not appreciable foreign money" in the project.

Thompson, along with his fellow Democrat Rep. John Garamendi, who represents an adjacent district, renewed calls for a thorough Cfius investigation given the Journal's findings, and urged California Forever to disclose publicly details of its shareholders. Garamendi said he's concerned foreign interests are involved, as is sometimes the case with limited liability companies, and could dictate use of the land around the base.



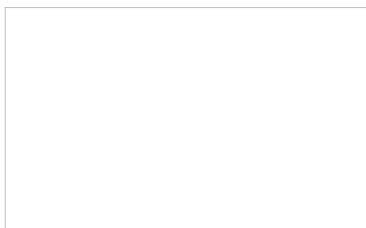
"It is very, very common for foreign money to find its way into the United States, legitimately and not, through an LLC, specifically through real estate," said Garamendi.

He said California Forever refused to give him details about its backers aside from saying most of the money comes from Silicon Valley investors. His skeptical response, he said: "I've been around awhile, fellas."



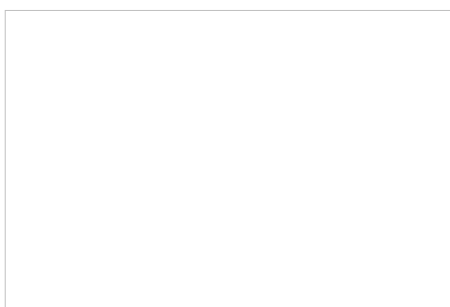
Reps. John Garamendi, left, and Mike Thompson are seeking an investigation into the venture. Michael Brochstein/Zuma Press; Kevin Dietsch/Getty Images

Sramek, in an interview, shrugged off concerns about Cfius. He said 97% of the funding is American and that a full list of the group's investors has been given to Cfius. Sramek declined in the interview to provide details on the size of his and others' stakes. A California Forever spokesman said the 3% stake held by foreigners belongs to three British and Irish investors, plus Mather.



Since he wasn't a U.S. citizen during the first several years of land buying, Sramek said, Cfius has jurisdiction for an investigation.

"Cfius absolutely could investigate," Sramek said. "Would Cfius conclude that this results in any kind of national security risk? I think that that's unlikely."



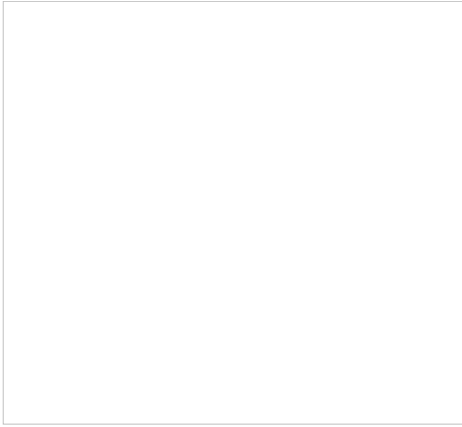
Mather, a dual South African and Irish national, said he never had decision-making authority in the project, never facilitated investments in it, nor held more than his current 0.3% stake. His sole duty, he said, was signing papers at Sramek's direction.

Sramek appointed Mather the manager of California Forever's primary land-buying vehicle, Flannery Associates LLC, which was set up in January 2018, corporate records show. Within two weeks, Mather helped make the venture's first land deal in Solano County, records show.

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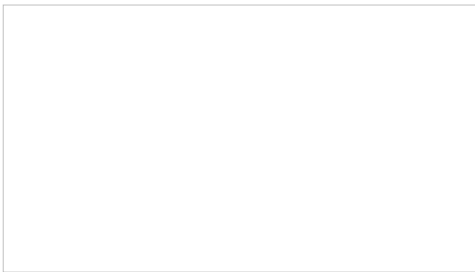
Questions from landowners and local and federal officials about the land-buying binge in largely agricultural swaths of Solano began to build over the past year. The paper trail on land purchases led to Flannery, a Delaware-registered company that isn't required to disclose its owners. Flannery accused dozens of landowners of price-fixing in a continuing federal lawsuit, fueling further calls for disclosure.



That pressure dissipated in August when the project's backers unveiled the plan for a new city. A New York Times article reported the venture's ambitions and noted its A-list investors, including LinkedIn co-founder [Reid Hoffman](#), former Sequoia Capital partner [Michael Moritz](#) and philanthropist [Laurene Powell Jobs](#).

Powell Jobs didn't comment, referring questions to California Forever. The others didn't respond to requests for comment.

Sramek was credited in the article as California Forever's creator. The project website says he set it up in 2017 and was its sole employee for nearly six years.



Unmentioned in the report and on the website was Mather. His name appears on Flannery documents, including transactions for land purchases, easements and other legal paperwork, according to property records and publicly available data. By the time of the publicity drive, Mather no longer held his managerial role, while retaining his stake in the venture. Sramek said he asked Mather to resign early this year as concerns emerged in local meetings and media reports about California Forever's possible foreign ownership.



California Forever' Billionaires Accused of Tricking People to Sign Petitions

Michael Daly

Thu, March 21, 2024 at 1:52 AM PDT 8 min read



Photo Illustration by Thomas Levinson/The Daily Beast/Getty

A young man was standing by a folding table with a pen and a stack of paper when Claudia Wilde emerged from the Target store in Fairfield, California, last week.

"He says, 'I have a petition... I need you to sign for better roads,'" she told The Daily Beast. "And I said, 'That's the name of the petition?' He goes, 'Yeah.'"

Although the county's roads do need work, Wilde had not heard any clamoring for improvement. She was aware, however, that a group of [Silicon Valley billionaires](#) who bought up more than \$800 million of farmland in surrounding [Solano County](#) to build a new city were seeking to get a zoning initiative on the ballot in November.

The billionaires, who call their venture [California Forever](#), hope to get 17,500 acres rezoned from "Agriculture" to "New Community Special Purpose Area" so they can develop 40,000 to 160,000 residential units for 100,000 to 400,000 residents.

But to get on the ballot, they need to collect 13,062 verified signatures by registered county voters such as Wilde. She, like many Solano residents, had been put off by the billionaires' [initial tactic of remaining anonymous](#) while purchasing huge tracts of land and pressuring farmers who were reluctant to sell even at above market prices.

"I said, 'This isn't a California Forever thing?'" the 70-year-old retired school teacher asked the man with the petition. "And he goes, 'No, no, it's for better roads.' I said, 'Let me see.'"

She took a look.

"I said, 'This is California Forever,'" she recalled. "And he goes, 'Well, you don't have to sign it.' I said, 'This is a scam! You should be ashamed of yourself!' And he says, 'Well, I still love you.'"

Her outrage was compounded by what she took to be a condescending tone.

"I'm pissed," she recalled.

[Billionaires Turn to Legal Bribery in Quest to Build Utopia](#)

She remained incensed when she arrived home and posted about the encounter on the Solano County Community Awareness Facebook page.

"I was furious that he lied about the real initiative," she wrote.

Her post in the early afternoon of March 13 quickly received more than 140 comments. A half dozen people reported a similar experience at other locations, involving different pitches.

"Yes! They lied to me, too!" a resident named Lisa Talivaa wrote in her comment.

By Talivaa's account, a person at a table outside the same Target had said he was soliciting signatures for a petition against "defunding benefits." She presumed he meant Medicare, which she definitely does not want cut.

"I walked up to the table and he started pushing paperwork in front of me and said, 'Sign here,' and I was like wtf? I don't sign anything unless I read it first," she wrote.

She later told The Daily Beast that when she did read it, she saw nothing about defunding benefits, but something at the bottom of the petition caught her eye.

"It says, 'Paid for by California Forever,'" she recalled.

The man had a number of other petitions on the table, but the one he was pressing her to sign was in support of the ballot initiative.

"And I said, 'I can't believe that you're telling me that I'm signing something about defunding Medicare and you're pushing that on me,'" she remembered. "I'm like, 'Do you realize what this is?' He goes, 'Yes, I know exactly what it is.' I said, 'Well, then why? Why would you push that on me after I came here under the understanding that I was signing a petition for defunding Medicare? Not this shit!'"

The man said she should sign the California Forever petition so she would have the ability to vote on the rezoning.

"I said, 'Do you hear what you're saying to me? You're telling me to put something on a ballot that I don't want to begin with?'" she said. "And so he's just like, 'That's not the point... Everybody's got a right to vote.' I said, 'Well, everybody's got a right to say no to something.'"



One of the parcels of land purchased by the California Forever backers.

Justin Sullivan/Getty

Others who responded to Wilde's post included Gina Vasquez, who said she encountered a table with several petitions outside the Walmart in Suisun City. She said a man handed her one and told her it was to say no to the California Forever proposal.

"And I was like, 'Really?... Are you telling me the truth? Because I've been seeing that you guys are lying,'" she told The Daily Beast. "He kind of just looked at me and looked away and started asking other people for their signatures. I said, 'Well, I'm gonna read this.'"

She said the verbiage was "like word puzzles" and it was hard to decipher what the goal of the petition was. But she had no difficulty understanding the words at the end saying who had paid for it.

"It said, 'California Forever,'" she recalled. "And I was like, 'You're kidding me.'"

She told the man she was not signing.

"If they pay for it, it's not to say no against it," she reasoned.

In another response to Wilde's post, Anita Montalbano of Vacaville said that she was leaving a Walmart there when a man asked if she was a California voter and presented her with a petition for legal measures against smash-and-grab robberies.

"I quickly scanned the information and was able to read that it was regarding smash and grab and changing the laws," she wrote. "So I signed it and just as I finished signing and was handing him the pen, he quickly slipped another clipboard in front of that and asked me, can you sign here, please? I asked him what is this for? He said we need signatures to help with housing."

She examined this second petition.

"I could clearly see that it said California forever," she recalled. "I told him I don't know and have enough information about California forever so I'm not going to sign it. In a very forceful and stern voice he looked at me and said, you don't have to worry about asking any questions, just sign and leave the asking to us."

She continued, "I said, again I don't have enough information or knowledge about California forever and the planning so I'm not gonna sign and he got closer to me and then a real forceful voice said to me 'and I said you don't have to worry about asking questions we will ask all the questions.'"

She told the man that he was not going to pressure her into signing .

"He looked at me like I had done something to really upset him, he quickly took the clipboards out of my hands and gave me the dirtiest look."

Gail Zick posted that she had encountered "petition gatherers" outside a Lucky's supermarket in Vacaville for what they called "an affordable housing initiative."



A barn stands on a parcel of land that was recently purchased near Travis Air Force Base on Aug. 29, 2023 near Rio Vista, California

Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

"I read the first paragraph & it's clearly the CA forever!" she wrote. "I told them it's NOT an affordable housing petition & explained it to them while about a dozen other people were listening. Sadly many voters are signing this petition without knowing what it really is!"

The affordable housing pretext is particularly outrageous when you consider something that California Forever chief executive Jan Sramek said at an "American Dynamism Summit" put on by Andreessen Horowitz, the venture capital firm.

According to a [transcript of a conversation](#) with one of the firm's general partners, Sramek talked about the residences that will be available in California Forever's new city.

"And then imagine that instead of paying 4 or 5 million dollars for a mediocre home in Palo Alto or San Francisco, your employees would be able to buy a nice house for a million dollars," he said.

When The Daily Beast told her of Sramek's estimation, Zick replied, "Hilarious if accurate."

The Daily Beast was not able to contact Montalbano or several other Solano residents who reported shady encounters with people collecting signatures for the California Forever petitions. California Forever did not respond to a request for comment or to a query regarding how it fields petitions.

John Gardner, the Solano County assistant registrar of voters, whose office oversees ballot initiatives there, told The Daily Beast he was unaware of problems with the California Forever petitions, but would refer any complaints to the California secretary of state for investigation.

A spokesman for the secretary of state told The Daily Beast that it had not received complaints regarding the California Forever petition. The spokesman noted, "It is a crime to misrepresent the contents or impact of an initiative measure," adding, "Any person may file a complaint with local law enforcement authorities or our office."

Solano Together, a coalition formed to oppose California Forever, posted online how to rescind a petition signature. Gardner confirmed that it can be done through the Voting Registrar's office by post or email.

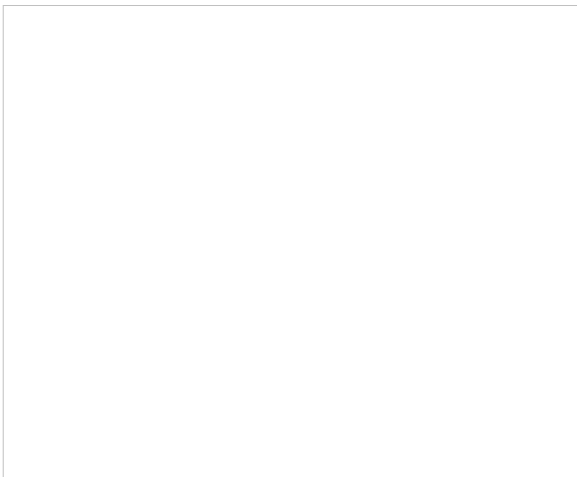
"It's pretty straightforward," Gardner said.



California Forever's investors include LinkedIn co-founder Reid Hoffman, philanthropist Laurene Powell Jobs and former Sequoia Capital partner Michael Moritz. Brendan McDermid/Reuters; Jemal Countess/Getty Images; Simon Williams for The Wall Street Journal

Mather, 37, and Sramek, 36, met when the two were interns at Goldman Sachs in London in 2007. Mather said he would "walk on coals" for Sramek and has been involved with Sramek's three post-Goldman ventures. Sramek said he trusts Mather, having known him for many years.

Sramek grew up in what is now the Czech Republic as it hurtled toward capitalism after the fall of the Soviet bloc. He described himself as driven in a memoir he self-published in 2009 titled "Racing Towards Excellence." At age 13, he writes, he sold website and database products to businesses and "started making money. Not a small amount, either."



He bet on sports and used some of his earnings to create a sports statistics provider to capitalize on the online gambling market, according to the book. Since he was a minor, he wrote, his mother set up the company in her name.

"The question isn't who is going to let me; it's who is going to stop me," he writes in the book, borrowing a line he and others have misattributed to midcentury author Ayn Rand.

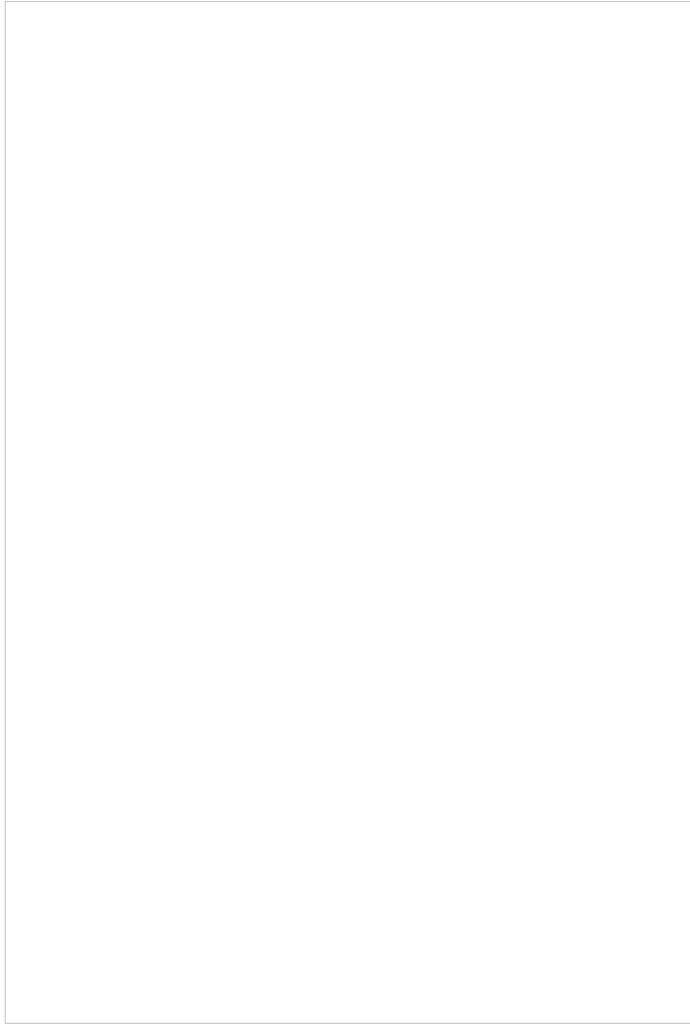
Mather, by contrast, said he wants to lead a simple, private life while pursuing investing. He had a modest upbringing, he said, on a farm outside the South African city of George.



Jan Sramek, California Forever's Czech-born creator, says 97% of the venture's funding is American. Photo: D. Ross Cameron

After Goldman, Mather co-founded a London-based Africa investment firm alongside Robert Hersov, heir to a South African mining industry fortune, and construction business scion Preston Haskell IV, who owns a gold mining operation in Russia. Mather said he left the venture after a few months.

He went on to marry a girlfriend he met in boarding school, who is a descendant of Charles Rudd, a co-founder of the De Beers diamond empire. From England, Mather currently invests for the family office of insurance magnate Douw Steyn, known for an opulent real-estate development outside Johannesburg named "Steyn City."



Online, Mather's profile is almost nonexistent, intentionally so for his privacy, he said. His name isn't on the website of the Steyn Group which lists 21 other employees, because, he said, he doesn't want to detract from Steyn's sons who run the office.

Mather said in an interview that a reason Sramek selected him for the Flannery role is due to his low profile. They wanted to maintain anonymity during the buying spree to avoid driving prices up, Mather and Sramek said.

Though he signed an extensive series of land deals for California Forever, Mather said he never set foot in Solano. Instead he often traveled to Philadelphia to get documents notarized, records show. Mather said he went there on Sramek's instructions.



The purchases of land surrounding Travis Air Force Base raised concerns over the identities of the project's backers. Photo: Justin Sullivan/Getty Images

Sramek declined to say why he chose that location. When offered some possible reasons by a Journal reporter, Sramek said, "Your answer that it's lower profile than New York is a really good one, so I'll take it."

As a result of the secrecy, land sellers didn't know whom they were dealing with.

In late 2022, Mather signed a \$45 million deal to buy more than 6,000 acres from the Sacramento Municipal Utility District, the region's power company. More than seven months later, SMUD board President Heidi Sanborn wrote to a colleague: "This really bothers me still that we don't know who they are," according to emails reviewed by the Journal under a public-records request.

A spokesman for SMUD said the utility completed "extensive due diligence" on the buyers.

Brett Forrest, Alexandra Wexler, Berber Jin, Elisa Cho and Jim Oberman contributed to this article.

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['I'm too old to start over': Kentucky widow, 76, facing eviction from beloved family home pleads with heartless developers who want to raze house for highway expansion](#)



The family of a 76-year-old widow started a petition after Kentucky highway developers tried to uproot her home of 55 years - only to be left in the dark by local officials about the future of her house.

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- ['Mouthpiece Of The State': Musk Pans NYT After Headline Calls Deep State 'Kind Of Awesome'](#)