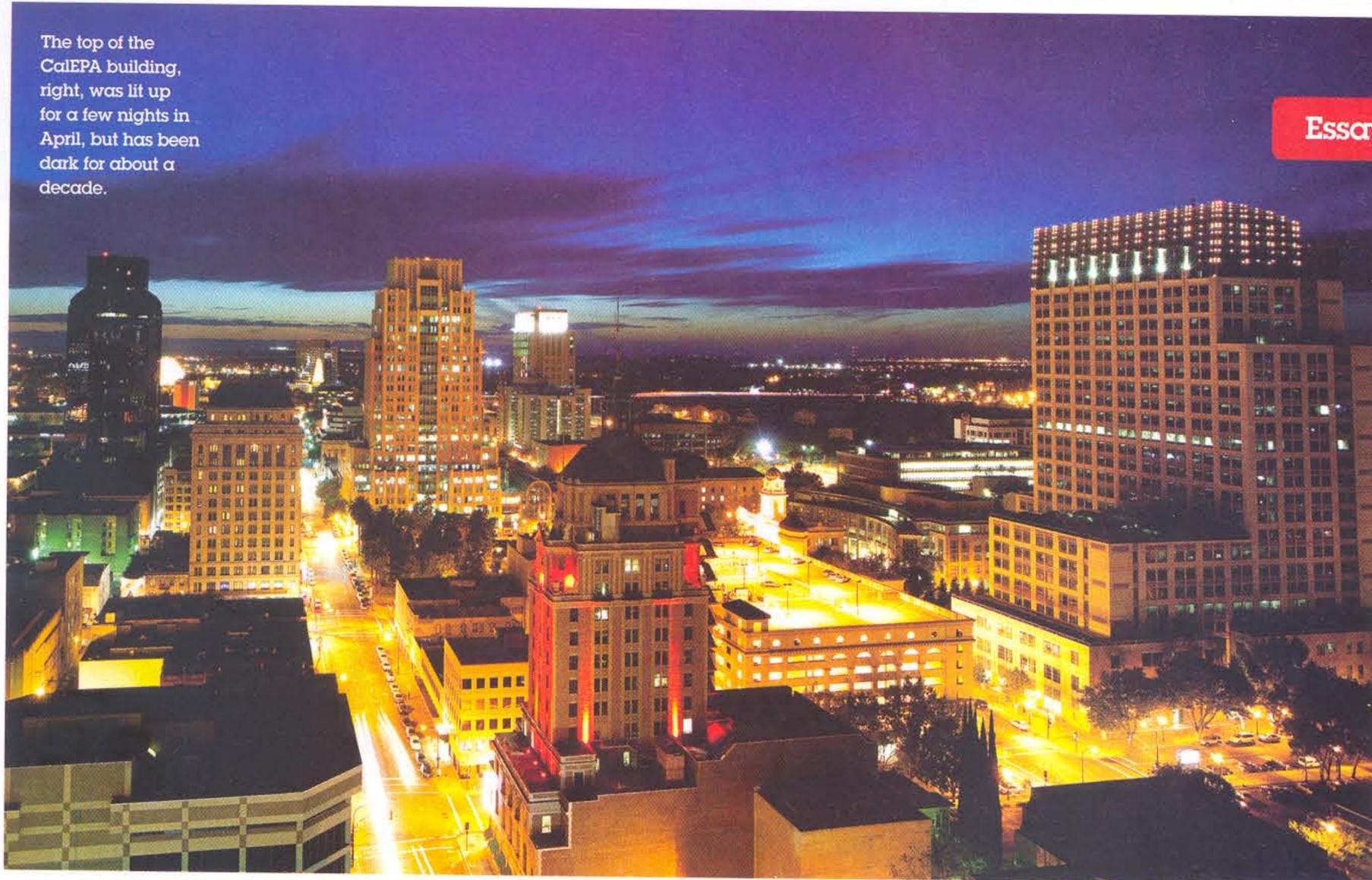


The top of the CalEPA building, right, was lit up for a few nights in April, but has been dark for about a decade.

Essay



## Bright Lights, Big City

The effort to save the Kings proved that we're a city that *can* come together when we want to. Now we have a chance to show how bright our future really can be

**by Rob Turner**

IN LATE APRIL, Sacramento was abuzz with the news that the NBA was in town to evaluate our city's ability to continue supporting a professional team. Fans dressed in purple, (some even dressed their dogs in purple); they ate purple ice cream, drank purple cocktails and hung purple banners in their windows. It was full-blown Kings mania, and it felt like that glorious 2001-02 season all over again.

But something else happened in those few days that got far less notice in the media, but was also happening for the first time in a decade. A handful of Sacramento's most prominent buildings were simultaneously illuminated for a few short nights—in support of the Kings—for the very first time in 10 years; for the very first time since the Kings reigned as “The Greatest Show on Court,” according to *Sports Illustrated*.

Every night that the Kings appeared on national television (which was *a lot* back then), an aerial shot of the city appeared on the screen as the network returned from the commercial break and there was the Capitol, Tower Bridge and the Ziggurat building—the pyramid-shaped building on the West Sacramento riverfront. They were all brilliantly aglow and the shot was obviously intended to show the city in its best light—vibrant, exciting, unique. It was the kind of civic marketing that you simply can't buy.

But it was during that year—2001—that Sacramento lost some of its brightest lights. And like our team's playoff dreams, they haven't returned since.

That was the year of the California energy crisis. And amidst the



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The Ziggurat's lights were turned off in 2001, and are now lit on only a few nights per year.

Drive through any major city at night and you'll see a skyline awash in lights, creating an instant sense of place and an aura of excitement. The mere physical presence of energy from those lights somehow magically translates to a more abstract sense of *having* energy—the cities feel alive, the lights bestowing on them a visual pulse.

growing threat of rolling blackouts, then-Governor Gray Davis asked private companies around the state, including owners of skyscrapers, to douse the exterior lights to help conserve energy. With government buildings, however, it wasn't a request; it was an order, and one by one, the lights of the city went dark.

Fast forward to 2003. Governor Davis ended the state of emergency, and the energy crisis was now a thing of the past. The only problem: No one told the building owners and managers (either the state or private ones) that they could turn their lights back on.

And so they didn't.

But little by little, cities across California *did* start switching them back on. Drive through any of our major cities at night and you'll see a skyline awash in lights, creating an instant sense of place and an aura of excitement as you draw near them (think of the nighttime view of San Francisco as you cross the Bay Bridge). The mere physical presence of energy from those lights somehow magically translates to a more abstract sense of *having* energy—the cities feel alive, the lights bestowing on them a visual pulse.

Except, of course, in Sacramento.

While it's true that we don't yet have a skyline that rivals our larger cousins across the state, the buildings that we do have are,

in fact, loaded with extraordinary lighting features. (And developer David Taylor deserves considerable credit for including an amazing L.E.D. lighting display atop his new U.S. Bank Tower that has remained lit since its opening a few years ago.)

So what are these mysterious buildings? They're actually five of the largest structures in Sacramento: the 25-story CalEPA building (with a crown that looks like Christmas lights at night), the 18-story Federal Courthouse, the 30-story Wells Fargo Center (the tallest building in town), the 28-story Park Plaza Tower (the old U.S. Bank Tower) and the Ziggurat. And yes, all of them have dramatic lighting features that would instantly alter our skyline.

Because the CalEPA building (2001) and Federal Courthouse (1999) were completed just before the energy crisis peaked, Sacramento hasn't known their nighttime alter ego in a decade. The Park Plaza Tower and Wells Fargo Center are privately owned, and have lit their structures on and off over the years, but neither one was lit as of late May.

Arguably the most visible of these buildings (the one the TNT cameramen always seemed to focus on) is the Ziggurat, which was designed for the *entire* structure to be illuminated at night. And on the rare occasions that it still is—mostly for a handful of televised River Cats games each sea-



The U.S. Federal Courthouse, left, is normally dark but casts a striking image when lit at night.

son—it dramatically changes the dynamic of downtown. It instantly transforms our lackluster riverfront into a destination, and draws the eyes and interest of the tens of thousands of cars passing through the city on Interstate 5 at night. It's a truly beautiful sight.

Coupled with the lights of Raley Field and the golden glow of the nearby Tower Bridge, the riverfront becomes the visual epicenter of the city. Add the post-game Saturday night fireworks—again, the power of light!—and this section of downtown is suddenly spectacular.

So why isn't the Ziggurat lit up anymore?

Chalk it up to bad timing and politics. Only weeks after Gray Davis issued that mandate to douse exterior lights in February 2001, the California Department of General Services announced that it was signing a 15-year lease to occupy the Ziggurat (it previously housed The Money Store headquarters, but the structure was recently acquired by Wells Fargo). And, according to the governor's wishes, the lights were summarily killed.

So now that the crisis is long gone, why not turn the Ziggurat's lights back on? If you think it's because of the Great Recession, guess again. The lights weren't on in the boom years either. Besides, it turns out that it costs only \$6 per hour to light the entire structure. So on summer nights like these, when it doesn't get dark until nearly 9 p.m., it would cost a mere \$18 per night to light it from dusk until midnight. That's about the same price as the single cheapest seat at a River Cats game.

Unfortunately, the real reason the Ziggurat isn't lit up is simply a matter of perception. The state doesn't want people to think it's wasting their tax dollars (although it's a safe bet that 99 percent of Sacramentans have no idea that the state occupies the structure).

But it's the perception of the *city* that is most damaged when its skyline goes dark. Cities, by their nature, are competitive entities. We just competed with Anaheim and thankfully won (at least for now). But we compete every day to lure and hold on to private companies, skilled workers and our brightest college graduates who are assessing their options.

The elements that make a city attractive are a complex stew of cultural, financial, geographical and other factors. And make no mistake that the perception of a vibrant downtown is high on the list for many people and companies (and sports leagues for that matter). And no matter how many hot new restaurants or clubs open downtown, we lose something when these businesses are buried between dark, imposing structures. Think of our towers as soaring, 200- to 400-foot beacons that announce our presence as a city. They're civic billboards, really. They're selling the promise of a vibrant central core. But they can't if they're dark.

So it's up to our city leaders to right this wrong. This is an opportunity for Sacramento Mayor Kevin Johnson, West Sacramento Mayor Christopher Cabaldon, their city councils, the Downtown Sacramento Partnership, the Metro Chamber, the Convention & Visitors Bureau and others who are fighting for this city every day, to convince the state, federal and private building owners to flip on their switches and shine a spotlight on this city. It will be, by far, one of the least expensive and most impactful changes we can make.

The simple fact that the management behind these buildings came together for a few brief nights to help our *team* suggests that there's hope to do it again every single night to help our *city*. So let's make sure that the next time the Kings are in the playoffs (in their brand-new downtown arena), that the TNT camera crew flying high overhead will see "The Greatest Show in Sacramento." ♦

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