



## **Local Governmental Officials Continue to Ignore Obvious Solutions for our Fiscal Problems**

by David F. Briggs

In a recent editorial in the Arizona Daily Star, titled “Chuck Huckelberry: Gas tax increase: Have I lost all sense? No. I’m facing reality”, the administrator of the Pima county government argues that we need to raise the tax collected from the sale of gasoline.

Unfortunately, Mr. Huckelberry’s views are not unique. Many politicians and government officials seem to believe our pocketbooks are an endless source for tax revenues. This problem is particularly acute here in Tucson, where many policies of city and county governments perpetuate our fiscal problems instead of encouraging the economic growth that is required to solve them.

Much of the land in the western United States is owned by federal, state and local governments. Only 11.7% of the land within Pima county is held by the private sector. This severely limits the acreage that is subject to property taxes, which provide a substantial portion of revenues required by state and local governments. Despite this handicap, Pima county developed the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan under which it has purchased more than 74,000 acres of private lands since 1999. This represents approximately 10% of the private property within Pima county. Local taxpayers have not only paid millions of dollars to purchase these lands, but continue to pay millions of dollars to manage these properties as well as having to pay for the loss tax revenues these lands would have produced had they remained within the private sector. The costs and restrictions imposed by the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan far exceed any of its purported benefits.

One of the biggest drains on our hard-earned tax dollars is waste and mismanagement within Tucson and Pima county governments. Nothing typifies this more than the Rio Nuevo project, where by some estimates \$230 million dollars was wasted over a ten year period. Overwhelmingly passed by the voters in 1999, this project was originally designed to encourage tourism and to redevelop and revitalize the downtown area. However, Tucsonans have little to show for their investment.

Under the Sonoran Desert Conservation plan, Pima county has leased the grazing rights for more than 124,000 acres of state and federal lands. The costs of leasing, subsidizing the private ranching operations conducted on these leases and managing this property hardly justify the benefits it provides to the taxpayer. Essentially duplicating the functions performed by state and federal agencies, it's just another unnecessary and costly layer of government bureaucracy that wastes our hard-earned tax dollars.

One of the best ways to increase tax revenues is to expand the economic base of our community. Diversified economies generally do better than those like Tucson that are strongly reliant on government jobs and the retail sector, which is dependent on the availability of disposable income (i.e. tourism and retirement community).

Unfortunately, both Tucson and Pima county have long pursued policies that discourage businesses from investing in our community. In some cases they have been openly hostile to creating new business opportunities that would benefit everyone.

The proposed development of the Rosemont Copper project is perfect example of what I am talking about. Here we have a major, environmentally sound mining project, which will annually pump more than \$700 million dollars into our local economy over the next twenty years, create 2,100 badly needed jobs for our community and annually generate \$19 million in incremental revenues for local governments. However, many elected officials in both Pima county and Tucson have not only opposed this project at time when unemployment is at record highs and local governments are struggling to pay their bills, but they have wasted millions of our tax dollars fighting efforts to develop this 21st century mining project.

Government functions best, when it limits itself to providing basic services like law enforcement, public works projects (i.e. roads) and our public educational system. The quality of these public services is what encourages new businesses to invest in our community. Both Tucson and Pima county need to do a better job of setting priorities, which will allow our community to prosper.

Disclaimer: David F. Briggs is a resident of Pima county and a geologist, who has intermittently worked on the Rosemont Copper project since 2006. The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of Rosemont Copper.

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