



Pima County Needs to Rethink its Priorities

by David F. Briggs

No doubt, many of you have heard that the Pima County Board of Supervisors has recently adopted a budget of \$1.17 billion for fiscal year 2016, which included another increase in our property taxes. This is in addition to their decision to place an \$815.76 million bond measure on the November 2015 ballot. Unfortunately, too many politicians and government officials seem to believe our pocketbooks are an endless source for revenues. This problem is particularly acute here in Tucson, where many policies of the county government perpetuate our fiscal problems instead of encouraging the economic growth our community desperately needs to solve them.

What types of things do businesses look for when making long-term investments in a community? One of the first things a business looks at is the community's public school system and its track record of providing a basic education. After all, businesses require a well-educated workforce to retain an edge over their competitors. Does Pima County provide the funding our public school system requires to prepare our citizens to successfully compete in the global marketplace? Is its curriculum designed to provide our citizens the basic training they require to succeed in today's world?

An area's infrastructure and its maintenance are also important factors in these business decisions as are many other basic services that local governments provide, such as law enforcement, fire and emergency services and criminal justice system. Think about it. How many economic opportunities have been lost due to Pima County's inability to adequately maintain our roads? Companies evaluate how local governments manage their assets and how these practices could impact future business investments that may be made in a community.

In this regard, how has Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan impacted economic growth in our community?

Much of the land in the western United States is owned by federal and state 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 the 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 land since 1999. This represents approximately 10% of the private property located within Pima County. Local taxpayers including the area's businesses, have not only paid more than \$200 million to purchase these lands, but continue to pay millions of dollars every year to manage these properties as well as having to make up for the loss tax revenues these lands would have generated had they remained within the private sector.

Under the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, Pima County also holds the grazing rights for nearly 130,000 acres of state and federal lands. The costs of leasing, subsidizing the private ranching operations that are required to maintain these leases, and managing this property hardly justify any of the purported benefits it was supposed to provide to the taxpayer.

What was Pima County's rationale in adopting the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan?

All of this resulted from the turmoil caused by the "Great Cactus Ferruginous Pygmy Owl Scam," when it was listed as an endangered species in 1997. Although the owl was subsequently removed from the endangered species list in 2006 because the listing was based on flawed science, the citizens of Pima County continue to suffer from its legacy today.

The original purpose of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan was to obtain an exemption from the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service in the form of an Incidental Take Permit under Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act. This would allow county public works projects to proceed even if they negatively impact some endangered species. This plan even allowed private land owners to opt into the plan and receive the same benefits as the county, but required them to adhere to strict land use requirements.

Although this plan has not been approved by federal officials since its original inception seventeen years ago, Pima County has been and continues to act as though it has been approved. They have revised county codes that require all private land owners to comply with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan's strict and costly land use regulations. Depending on where you reside within the Conservation Land System, it now requires landowners to leave 60% to 95% of their property in a natural or undisturbed condition. In doing so, Pima County has essentially confiscated the private property.

If Pima County was truly interested in dealing with this issue, there are much less expensive and less intrusive ways to do so. It makes one wonder if they were really interested in dealing with issues related to the Endangered Species Act or whether their true goal was to tighten their control over the use of private property. This sounds like the classic bait-and-switch scheme to me. What do you think? Private land owners have gotten all of the restrictions and none of the plan's purported benefits. Broken promises do not encourage businesses to invest in our community.

Is the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan capable of its meeting its goal of mitigating future impacts under the Endangered Species Act? The lands purchased under this plan are so fragmented they offer little mitigation value. Furthermore, is Pima County's use of leased state and federal lands really a valid approach to mitigating impacts under the Endangered Species Act? Why should Pima County receive "bragging rights" for duplicating functions that are already performed by state and federal agencies? Do they really believe they can manage our public lands better than the state of Arizona or the federal government? Or is this just another example of mismanagement, which adds another unnecessary and costly layer of government bureaucracy that wastes our hard-earned tax dollars?

To date, the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan has squandered several hundred million dollars of public revenues that could have been better used to provide badly needed basic services to our community. And November's bond measure (Proposition 430) seeks voter approval for an additional \$95 million to fund open space purchases. These policies have increased the competition for available private lands, negatively impacting the costs of living and doing business for all who reside and work in Pima County. All of this discourages the economic growth our community desperately needs to solve our fiscal problems.

Furthermore, Pima County has a reputation of creating roadblocks against business development through cumbersome permitting processes, stonewalling and downright harassment of companies, who wish to create jobs in our community. This hostility toward the private sector is exemplified by their opposition to the Rosemont Copper project.

Local 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 businesses to invest in our community. Mr. Huckelberry and the Pima County Board of Supervisors (with the exception of Ally Miller) have repeatedly shown themselves incapable of setting priorities that will enable our community to prosper. It's time citizens of our community replace them with individuals, who will manage the county's business more wisely.

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