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## Quest for sustainability opens up opportunities

Opinion by Bob Cook

Building a sustainable economy is the greatest challenge we now face in Southern Arizona. Managing growth is necessary, but is only part of what is required for success.

Our mounting problems are largely the result of overdependence on population growth to keep our economy thriving. In addition to our attractive climate, desert landscape and friendly, diverse culture, people migrate here for the affordable lifestyle.

Until recently, we offered many low-cost advantages — namely cheap water, energy, labor, capital and land. We also subsidized the expansion of public infrastructure and services to serve growth, mostly out of general revenues.

As long as these favorable, artificial conditions for growth prevailed, people continued to move here.

Even though public systems and services were underfunded, this growth dynamic benefited most of us as long as the base kept growing.

But now the conditions underpinning growth have changed — we find ourselves in a drying, warming Southwest with looming water shortages; the end of cheap oil, natural gas, and coal; price increases for food supplies; a super competitive global economy — and in the face of these growing uncertainties — questions about the declining health of the American economy and its financial systems.

What does sustainability mean for us here as we confront these major, converging challenges of the 21st century?

Instead of debating the infinite pros and cons of growth, we must focus on what really matters most to us — how are we going to successfully transition to an economy which sustains our quality of life into the future but doesn't require perpetual population growth to keep it thriving?

The Arizona Department of Commerce initiated an important study several years ago to answer this question, ("Positioning Arizona for the Next Big Technology Wave," Battelle Memorial Institute, 2004). However, that prospectus was mostly neglected and, to date, remains little known.

The bottom-line finding is that we are well-positioned to sustain and grow our economy by developing a sustainable systems industry based on already existing strengths in engineering, optics, biosciences, environmental design, earth sciences and natural resources.

Our sustainability challenges can all be converted into opportunities for centers of excellence in economic development. These sustainable systems and technologies would include resource-efficient products, services and practices in the areas of water, energy, food, health, transportation and housing. And perhaps most important, these industries would supply both the local economy and rapidly growing export markets — all responding to the new demands for higher performance standards.

Population growth is certain to slow down naturally as land slated for development is utilized. Yet our economy's continuing overdependence on this single industry leaves our community increasingly vulnerable.

Given the scale of uncertainty we face, the big questions that should concern us are: Will we respond to these challenges in time to protect our quality of life? Will we build a new economy based on the opportunities of sustainability? Or will we witness these converging challenges become the first steps of long-term economic decline?

In his recent State of the City speech, Mayor Bob Walkup urged the business and environmental communities to engage on the profound confluence of economic, ecological and social issues that now face our community.

Surely, we need clarity about where we are and where we're headed. And we need a way to common ground, common vision and full community participation.

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