

November 4, 2008

Tucson-Pima Water Study
PO Box 2344
Tucson, AZ 85701

RE: Defining sustainability

Dear Committee Members:

The concept of sustainability has been defined as “meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” by the Brundtland Commission. This has generally become the standard definition of the term used today. The context in which it has been used is typically ecological sustainability, but other references have recently discussed the three pillars of sustainable development – environmental, social, and economic [see e.g. Value and Principle #10 of the 2005 World Summit Outcome Document, World Health Organization, September 15, 2005, available at: <http://www.who.int/hiv/universalaccess2010/worldsummit.pdf>]. I would like to focus here on the notion of economic sustainability, which I believe requires that we permit continued growth in our community – including more population, more commercial development, and most importantly, growth and diversification of our economic base.

Few would disagree that for much of the past century the main business of Tucson has been growth. Continuous and sometimes rapid population growth has been the prime driver of our economic base. Similarly, few would disagree that this type of growth has brought with it numerous problems, ranging from a system where local governments are far too dependent on tax revenues supplied by growth to provide necessary public services to water supplies that are so overstretched they require supplementation from other similarly overstretched supplies to meet current and future demands. Despite this, growth does still need to be a part of the economic base of this community. The blame for the problems growth has led to does not lie with growth itself, but with the way growth has been managed (or not managed).

A primary task of this committee is to try to develop community consensus regarding how our community should grow. I interpret that to mean that continued growth is a part of our future and I believe that the economic sustainability of this community must incorporate growth. Lack of growth may be the ideal of some in this community who yearn for a Tucson remembered, but lack of growth equals stagnation, which will ultimately erode our quality of life. A vibrant community must incorporate some growth, provided that such growth occurs within sensible parameters established by available natural resources and community consensus. Growth is also necessary to create continued opportunities for the next generation to remain in Tucson and contribute to our community.

Accommodating growth, however, will entail some measure of compromise. While I would be delighted to see some of our dry washes flowing again because we have reduced our groundwater pumping to levels that permit rising groundwater levels, I don't believe that type of scenario is consistent with the demands of our current population, much less future population. Also, while some in our community will welcome the creation of higher density, urban development there will still be others who prefer the more suburban lifestyle available on the fringes of the city. People cannot be forced into a lifestyle they do not choose for themselves. Therefore, our community will always sprawl across large tracts of desert, with all the problems that entails.

This does not mean, though, that we must sacrifice our environment at the altar of growth. The two can coexist with careful planning and policies that create the proper incentives to encourage growth in locations and forms that permit protection of our most important natural resources. Residents of established parts of the city should not be asked to subsidize growth on the fringes by using our taxes

to build roads and install other infrastructure. Those costs must be borne by the new development. Rezonings and comprehensive plan amendments to accommodate new development must not be approved without first considering the impact of those developments to water supplies, among other resources, as the county has sensibly initiated recently.

We can make our existing water resources meet the needs of this sensible growth by encouraging greater efficiency. I am a strong proponent of pricing mechanisms that encourage consumers to properly value their water uses – non-essential uses, for which high quality drinking water is not required. It has been said that education will affect the behavior of 10% of the population, while the remaining 90% will respond to price signals. We are currently a very efficient community in our water use, but greater efficiencies can still be achieved. We also have one source of water that is guaranteed to grow along with our population – reclaimed water, which needs to make up a more significant portion of our water supply portfolio over time. Finally, if additional water supplies are needed for the region, the agricultural sector is a likely source, because very small reductions in ag water use can produce very large increases in municipal water supplies.

I wish to thank the committee for taking on this monumental task and hope that my comments provide a helpful representation of the average Tucsonan, struggling to make ends meet in these difficult economic times, while hoping to see Tucson remain a vibrant and enlightened community for many more years.

Sincerely,

Christopher Brooks