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Arizona Town Hall tackles wide range of issues

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I attended the 91st Arizona Town Hall held at the Grand Canyon Oct. 28-31 and found it to be an intense educational opportunity.

The theme of this Town Hall was "Land Use - Challenges and Choices for the 21st Century." The process was amazing as Arizona Town Hall is truly a citizens' think tank.

Prior to the meeting, we all received a background report on the topic prepared by Arizona State University. A lot of highly intelligent, involved people compiled statistics and explanations of legislative and court actions involving land use as well as the fiscal, environmental and cultural issues they impact. We all studied the material prior to showing up at the Grand Canyon.

Land use impacts

We all know that, in Mohave County, land use impacts everything. Developments impact transportation, water, sewer, flood channels, schools, businesses, etc. And I'm not just talking about master-planned communities.

Unregulated lot splits are having a huge impact on this county. There are people who buy chunks of land and then split them as many times as possible to sell for a profit without investing in any flood work or infrastructure that would benefit the people who purchase the lots or the future communities. In these rural areas, that has created a real problem. Those areas do not generate enough revenue to aid governing agencies in putting in that needed infrastructure.

Planned is better

Many of our rural residents consider development to be "urban sprawl." They've seen the results of that kind of unregulated growth in other areas. Obviously, planned communities are far better. Correct planning allows for better quality communities that will cost less to construct because there will be less backtracking to correct unplanned problems. Well-planned high-density developments are often more practical than medium or low-density construction because they concentrate infrastructure and minimize environmental concerns. Obviously, sewer systems with recycled tertiary water for irrigation are far superior to thousands of septic tanks.

Loss of farmland

Another issue we talked about that I have had concerns with for many years is that development is eating up so much of our productive farmland for residential and commercial use. If we continue to do that over the next 50 years, we are going to shoot ourselves in the foot. We certainly don't want to get into a situation where we depend on imported food. Look what has happened with our dependence on imported oil.

California is a prime example of the destruction of some of America's best farmland. Proper planning can prevent that from happening here.

Paying for roads

Transportation issues were hotly debated. Construction and improvement of roads is a huge issue throughout our state. And, in context to the estimate that we will double our population over the next 50 years, we need to plan and act on those present and future needs.

Funding of roads and other infrastructure is of primary interest. How do we build for our present and future needs? We all know that nothing is free. Will construction be paid for through development agreements, impact fees, gas taxes or just a plain old road tax? The group did not come to consensus on that item. There was a lot of discussion on how growth can pay for itself.

We had close to 150 people with a variety of expertise at the Town Hall. We were broken up into four groups and we all dealt with the same questions. There were other elected officials, lobbyists, attorneys, real estate and other business people, representatives from the state, cities, tribes and other governmental agencies, among others, attending. Mohave County Manager Ron Walker, Public Defender Dana Hlavac and Planning and Zoning Director Chris Ballard also attended.

We went at it for two days, and on the third morning, they had all of our positions summarized. At that time, we reformed our groups and discussed the findings before bringing them out during a meeting of all attendees. That is where we began to get a lot of conflict with ideas. Our issues and answers will be presented to state legislators to see if they can do anything for us.

Next: Education

I learned a lot during the Town Hall and I recommend future Town Halls to anyone who cares about our communities and the future of Arizona. The next Town Hall will be held in Prescott during April and will focus on K-12 education, according to the Hall's Web site, "with an emphasis on preparing, recruiting and retaining teachers, and reviewing funding challenges."

I invite anyone who is interested in Town Hall to call me at 758-0713. I was nominated to attend the meeting by Walker, who is on the Town Hall Board of Directors Executive Committee. He and other board members can nominate people to be invited to attend future Town Halls.

Besides land use and education, Town Halls have focused on water issues and health care, among others. We need constructive proposals from all interested Arizonans to meet these and other challenges of the 21st Century. Anyone interested in reading our findings on land use or receiving information concerning future Town Halls should go to the Web site at www.aztownhall.org.

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