

Dear Editor,

Sustain (maintain)

1 to cause or allow something to continue for a period of time:

2 to keep alive:

Your headlines seemed like a dream come true: “*Lower tax, few cuts in county budget*” [Arizona Daily Star 4-28-09], declaring a “*drop in property taxes*” for a “*total budget ... down \$6 million...*”

Not explained is that the \$6 million dollar “reduction” is offset by an increase of almost \$22 million in the total property tax levy amount, from \$399 million in 2008-09 to \$421 million in 2009-10. A more accurate headline could have read “*County to collect over \$15 Million more from the taxpayers!*”

This is because increase assessed values counters any real reduction in taxes. This year’s current tax rate is based on \$746 Million in increased primary property assessments for 2007 -- figures derived before the recession hit. Our property is being over-valued and over-taxed. Last year, Supervisor Ann Day and I submitted an alternative budget to the Board majority. In our introduction we explained:

“[W]hile the Primary tax rate decreased from \$4.072 to \$3.602 between 2002 to 2007, the amount of revenue collected by the county increased by over \$70 million dollars...”

Your newspaper had clarified this in an article [10/22/08] with the headline: “*Though tax rate dips, we’re all paying more.*” The article explained how, even with the drop in tax rates: “*taxpayers are paying twice as much in property taxes as they did a decade ago.*”

Equally ominous is the hidden long term and ever increasing debt. Our debt service has jumped this year by \$10 million to a total of \$110 million dollars, which currently makes up over 37% of our primary property taxes. And Pima County’s debt is going up with non-voter approved debt through “Certificate’s of Participation.” In fact, *Pima County’s current outstanding principal debt is almost twice as large as all other Arizona counties debt combined* (\$757.6 million vs. \$339.7 million). Next year the county wants a \$500 million dollar bond sale next year for our Wastewater Department. *Who do you think gets to pay these debts?*

And speaking of other debt obligations, University Physicians at Kino Hospital is now asking for an extra \$30 Million dollar subsidy, with up to \$39 Million in each of the next five years (even though the original agreement assured decreased payments and self-sufficiency). But as the county reduces support for the cost of health screenings, the County Administration increases its budget by \$2.7 million. While we increase fees for our children to play in county parks, this same budget increases Economic Development subsidies by an extra \$14 million.

This raises the question of “*sustainability*” – a term used often with regards to the environment, but which should apply to our taxpaying citizens.

Because as we continue to bleed our taxpayers dry by continuing to raise taxes and fees on everything without a mandatory cap, the number of homeowner’s facing foreclosure remains at record levels in Pima County. We need to learn to live within our means rather than attempting to instill false impressions about “rate reductions.” But to do so, we need to have an honest accounting of our revenues and expenses.

There are three steps that could be taken immediately to help in the process:

1. We need the majority on the Board to stop refusing to appoint their representatives to the outside Citizen’s Budget Advisory Committee. Other people without a vested interest in the growth of government need to make an objective review of the Pima County budget. Since 1997, the Board has never allowed this committee to have a quorum.
2. There needs to be at least three public meetings on the budget, preferably at night – not just one meeting, scheduled for Tuesday morning, May 19th, when most working people can’t attend, in which all departments are superficially reviewed and a tentative budget is quickly adopted.
3. Finally, the county budget should be posted in both the Arizona Daily Star and the Tucson Citizen for the general public to be able to review. We paid TNI over \$600,000 last year; we can afford to have their readers see our budget.

There are no legitimate reasons why Pima County government can’t be more transparent with the use of taxpayer funds. Perhaps, with a more informed public, deceitful declarations regarding property taxes will be subjected to a bit more scrutiny. One can only hope.

Ray Carroll

732 words