

TUCSON WEEKLY

Turning for the Better: Tucson is in terrible shape, but we can fix it

<http://www.tucsonweekly.com/tucson/turning-for-the-better/Content?oid=3140893>

August 26, 2011

by Dave Devine and Molly McKasson

Blessed with a majestic natural setting, a rich and diverse cultural history, fine climate, and friendly people, it would seem Tucson had been dealt four aces. But while our community has grown into a metropolitan area, many problems have gone unsolved: an ever-escalating poverty rate; a troubled job-market rife with chronic low wages; and a pattern of sprawling growth that isolates rather than brings us together.

For more than a century, the prevailing philosophy in Tucson has been "Bigger is Better." While over time many residents have resisted the notion that success for our community meant following in the footsteps of Phoenix and Los Angeles, since the early 1900s, political, business and community leaders have embraced the "boom and bust" mentality.

The latest severe "bust" in our economic cycle has left many folks wishing for a return to the roaring "boom" times, even though another temporary "boom" won't solve our recurring social and economic doldrums.

But Tucson has always been home to a great deal of ingenuity and creativity. There are many Tucsonans who believe we can solve our problems by doing things differently.

What follows are 11 perspectives on how Tucson might not just weather the current downturn, but actually move in a different direction. We offer these as food for thought at a time when Tucson seems hungry for a new, more successful vision of itself.

PERSONAL WELL-BEING

Blake Ashley

The Dalai Lama has said, "Happiness does not come from having more. It comes from wanting less." There is deep wisdom in this for a time of austerity.

But how can anyone really apply this antidote to the failed cult of consumerism? One proven method is the practice of meditation.

I began mindfulness meditation in earnest about 10 years ago, learning the techniques at the Tucson Community Meditation Center (TCMC). TCMC is a nonprofit, non-sectarian organization dedicated to teaching and supporting

the practice of mindfulness meditation. Among the many benefits of the meditation practice, most of them being rather difficult to articulate, is being happy with less. And it costs nothing to learn and nothing to practice.

TCMC offers a full schedule of free meditation classes. A schedule and description of the classes, as well as the location of the center and information about special events, can be found at the website: tucsonmeditation.org.

So my personal strategy for the coming time of austerity is my own meditation practice. I try to share this skill with the community by leading a meditation class on Monday evenings at TCMC and also for the Pima County and city of Tucson employee-wellness programs. I suggest that everyone give it a try.

Blake Ashley is a UA graduate with degrees in psychology and chemistry. After graduating from Loyola Law School and working at a legal megafirm, he is now the city of Tucson's environmental attorney.

THE RE-BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Tres English

Mother Nature doesn't allow do-overs. We either live within the planet's means, or kill ourselves because we don't.

What can we do? In a word—re-localize.

To produce a secure food supply, establish a rain-watered, desert-adapted, edible urban forest. And create thousands of neighborhood-scale, aquaponics systems, using one-tenth the water of conventional agriculture.

To tackle transportation, remodel Tucson into a network of about 80 urban villages—intensified existing commercial centers surrounded by beautiful, shady neighborhoods and connected with excellent transit and home-delivery service. Also, create a fleet of locally manufactured electric bikes and an electric Zipcar sharing program (powered by PV panels and a wind farm in the Chiricahuas).

For homes: Wrap 250,000 poorly insulated homes in maximum insulation. Use LED lights, highest efficiency appliances, solar ovens, solar water heaters and high-efficiency windows. Install 10 MW power towers in every one-quarter square mile (Google "Seville Power Tower"—it is beautiful), and install district heating/cooling for a system that is over 70 percent thermally efficient.

Develop ways to extract the millions of tons of metals and plastics in our landfills, and use them in local industries, first making needed insulation, windows and bikes for this transition, then other important items.

Create a Desert X-Prize to help us invent affordable technologies: mass water harvesting, external home insulation, small-scale aquaponics systems, etc. Then create new systems for people to invest in these world-class, Tucson-based desert-adapted technologies, and in each other.

There are ways to do what we need to do. We must have the will to do them.

Tres English runs a local nonprofit that helps Tucson travel the path toward sustainability, including a neighborhood mini-co-op, where people learn sustainability skills, and a high school program for teaching students sustainable technologies in water, food and energy. Tres is a founding member of Sustainable Tucson and a residential property manager.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHALLENGES

Diana Liverman

Many of us move to Tucson because we love the desert environment and because the region offers opportunities for environmentally focused study, recreation or employment. Yet our lifestyles are increasingly unsustainable; they place enormous pressures on local energy, water and ecosystems and contribute to global-scale problems such as climate change and biodiversity loss.

What can we do to reduce our environmental footprint? Although Tucson has some of the lowest per-person residential water use in the Southwest at less than 100 gallons per day, we could save even more water (up to 35 gallons) by halving time in the shower and using a water-saving shower head; washing dishes with a full dishwasher on quick wash (saving up to 20 gallons); and rainwater harvesting, desert landscaping and irrigating with greywater.

We can cut energy use and carbon dioxide emissions, too. The city of Tucson produces more than 7 million tons of CO₂ a year—a third from automobiles and half from fossil fuel-generated electricity. To avoid dangerous climate change, the U.S. needs to cut emissions 80 percent by 2050—a tremendous challenge.

The Tucson Electric Power carbon calculator indicates ways we can reduce our individual emissions from a U.S. average of almost 30 tons per year.

Installing solar hot water or solar electric can save up to 9 tons per year; planting shade trees and adjusting thermostats could save 1 ton; halving car use through car pooling, bikes or buses saves up to 8 tons; and eliminating one roundtrip flight from Tucson to the East coast can save another ton.

Although many groups in Tucson—including the University of Arizona—are promoting and moving toward more sustainable practices, we need to enlist even more ways to make a transition to sustainability affordable and attractive, involve everyone, and show that a greener Tucson is a better place for business, ecology and people.

For more info:

<http://portal.environment.arizona.edu/>
<http://www.tucsonaz.gov/ocsd>
<http://www.sustainabletucson.org>

Diana Liverman co-directs the Institute of the Environment at the University of Arizona and is an expert on climate policy and food security. She tries to reduce her environmental footprint but still flies too much.

SUSTAINABLE LOCAL BUSINESS

Kevin Koch

Technicians for Sustainability (TFS) is committed to improving the community we live in through implementation of renewable energy. Our mission is to help individuals and businesses implement sustainable technologies through the installation of solar hot water and solar electric systems.

Both of these systems are easy ways for Tucsonans to take steps toward reducing their impacts. Local businesses, such as Fourth Avenue's Brooklyn Pizza, Antigone Books and Sky Bar, as well as hundreds of homeowners in the Tucson area have already taken this step with us and we are proud to be a part of their sustainability missions.

The impacts of implementing a solar system do not end with the installation. Installing solar often increases awareness about other ways to reduce our collective impacts—including reducing impacts from transportation and reducing water consumption.

Likewise, the decision to implement sustainable choices encourages others to do the same. This is the solar snowball effect.

In addition to implementing solar, TFS strives to make our community better through building a sustainable business model. As a mission-driven company, we believe that we are not successful unless years from now, we have left Tucsonans with the feeling that the steps they took to implement solar were excellent decisions. This is what is required to build a long-lasting movement toward renewable energy.

Nor are we successful unless we have worked to reduce the impact of our own operations. To that effect, most employees ride bikes to work and when possible, to job sites, and many employees live with the systems we install.

We operate a fleet of vehicles including biodiesel, electric vehicles and smaller than industry standard trucks.

Perhaps most importantly, we strive to provide a workplace which encourages idealism and a sense of responsibility for a better future for Tucson.

Kevin Koch is the owner of TFS. Personally committed to implementing sustainability in his life, he and his family utilize PV, solar hot water, greywater and rainwater catchment systems.

HEALTH AND WELLNESS

Adam Valdivia

In September 2008, with high hopes and very little capital, Sleeping Frog Farms was founded on a scrubby quarter-acre patch of unincorporated Pima County and began supplying produce to a few farmers' markets and restaurants.

Less than two years later, we were able to purchase 75 acres in the San Pedro River valley, and, like a handful of other local farms have done in recent years, began a CSA (community supported agriculture). CSA is an agreement between a customer and a farm in which the customer pays in full for their goods prior to the season beginning.

The customer shares in the risks and rewards each season, their financial investment returned in the form of fresh food. The customer's commitment and financing provided through the CSA structure help reduce the impact felt by the farmer from seasonal ebbs and flows regarding production, market and the whims of Mother Nature.

In sticking to our farm's mission to supply Southern Arizona (and only Southern Arizona) with as much ecologically sound and vital produce as possible, we have found the CSA model indispensable. The ever-increasing support from businesses, institutions, families and individuals participating in CSA programs with small local farms is imperative in growing and securing an integral part of our region's food system.

Adam Valdivia grew up and has lived in Southern Arizona since 1983 and is a co-owner/operator of Sleeping Frog Farms in Cascabel.

HISTORIC PRESERVATION

Ken Scoville

Historic preservation is an important part of a great city. Preservation only happens when the leaders of the community and the general populace want to incorporate the past with the future through public policy.

Western cities like Tucson have been impacted by staggering Sunbelt migrations which began in the 1950s. They have fared poorly in their attempts to retain a sense of place through preservation of historic buildings and landscapes.

There are even greater losses when the aristocracy of a city is composed of land speculators, developers and car dealers who have the greatest to gain with rapid growth and quick money. Even worse is when the city government is willing to be a whore to their wishes during the rezoning process. The long-term financial benefits of regionalism and sense of place are lost with chants that preservationists are "no-growthers."

Demolitions continue as a way of life by our community leaders in Tucson. Two years ago Unisource destroyed the 1917 portion of the Santa Rita Hotel. Just this summer Tucson Medical Center quietly demolished a 1920s two-story building of the Desert Sanatorium era.

It is ironic that it would have been easier to save both buildings if they were on the island of Manhattan. Their landmark designation that decades ago saved Grand Central Station and was upheld by the Supreme Court continues to preserve the island's sense of place and grandeur. Preservation and progress can coexist but only when community leaders with support of the overall community desire this.

Tucson is not a great city.

Ken Scoville is a native Arizonan with an abiding interest in the history of Tucson and Arizona and is an outspoken advocate for historic preservation.

DOWNTOWN

Roberto Bedoya

Downtown is the place where you experience Tucson's distinct identity, as a city that loves life, loves its creative soul, loves its diversity.

The toxic cynicism of the "no" people, who see no value or "better" in our civic life, who slam downtown, need to experience Second Saturdays; see a play produced by the Arizona Theatre Company, *Beowulf*, or *Borderlands*; take an art class at the Drawing Studio; see an exhibition at the Tucson Museum of Art, MOCA or Raices Taller; attend a literary reading hosted by Chax or Kore Presses; listen to our chamber music ensembles or choirs at the Leo Rich, experience the symphony or opera at the Music Hall; dance to a band covering Petula Clark's "Downtown" at the Rialto, or Club Congress; see a flick at the Fox, La Placita or the Screening Room; or attend the All Souls Parade, Tucson Meet Yourself or the Open Studio Tour. It's all here!!

These experiences are the cultural assets that we have and can build upon that will advance Tucson as a livable city and boost the economic health of our city. I recall a remark that a taxi driver in Houston shared with me when he was talking about his downtown—"Big money lays people off, small monies keep downtown alive." Astute.

The powers of the small monies be it the ticket buyer, the patron, the diner, the festival attendee contribute to the cultural vibrancy of downtown and our city.

Additionally, the public and private investments of community developers have contributed much to Tucson's downtown revitalization. Behind all these activities, these investments, is a yes that affirm the ways the arts create community, a sense of belonging that define us as Tucsonans that enlivens downtown, that celebrates how we live, work and play together.

Roberto Bedoya is the executive director of the Tucson Pima Arts Council.

EDUCATION

Robin Hiller

Voices for Education believes we can brighten the future of Tucson's students by training parents to advocate for all children. Through our Parent Leadership Institutes, we have empowered over 400 parents. These parents have gone on to run for school boards, create other education advocacy groups and organize to keep their schools open.

Since 2008, Arizona has cut \$2.2 billion dollars in funding for K-12 education, created a political culture that vilifies teachers and this year will spend \$13 million on mandated standardized tests. Our programs foster real reform. For more information go to our website: voicesforeducation.org.

Our vision is to have every child in Arizona attend a school with small classes, caring and experienced teachers, a curriculum rich with science, history, foreign languages and the arts, and a teaching environment that encourages problem solving and creative thinking.

Our strategy is to mobilize a new generation of leaders focused on real reform, not profit motivated strategies created by non-educators. Politicians in leadership positions at the Legislature and in Congress endorse policies that are destroying public education.

It's dangerous to turn our public schools over to private businesses. Rupert Murdoch recently purchased the largest online charter school in the U.S. Having non-educators run our schools and decide education policy is like asking your banker to treat a brain tumor and then forcing medical schools to teach his techniques.

Even in good times, our Legislature cuts education funding. In bad times, Voices for Education will still give voice and support to parents, teachers, students, and we'll work to put in place reforms that educators back and research supports. We will fight privatization of public education and teaching to the test. We'll work with other groups to pass a statewide initiative that supports these goals.

Robin Hiller is the founder and executive director of Voices for Education. She worked for Molly McKasson during McKasson's tenure on the City Council.

ECONOMY

Herminia Cubillos

Tucson will improve its economy, lower its poverty rate and increase its wages when it develops a workforce of highly skilled technicians. This is the key to attracting companies to Tucson and Pima County.

The current economy forced job market restructuring. While low-skilled jobs are disappearing, a mushrooming global economy is creating major opportunities in science, technology, engineering and math (STEM)—a new direction for this country's economic growth.

These STEM jobs require strong math, writing and critical thinking skills along with the ability to work with a team.

A 2009 Batelle report on the Economic Impact of the Bioscience Sector in Arizona projected that this sector will grow by 62 percent between 2009 and 2020, providing an additional 97,045 jobs in Arizona. Also cited: More than 60 percent of employees of high-tech companies have less than a four-year degree.

A 2010 University of Arizona Workforce Study reported a significant portion of new hires for medical lab technician, manufacturing and production, technical support, and engineering technician need less than a full degree.

We can attract companies that bring high skilled and well-paying jobs to our community if we will commit to funding job training for these careers in the high-tech sector.

Are we serious about improving our economy, lowering the poverty rate and increasing wages? Let's have a community discussion around our priorities for the future of Tucson and Pima County.

Herminia Cubillos has been the JobPath executive director since it was founded 12 years ago. JobPath is a nonprofit workforce development organization that sponsors low-income adult residents of Pima County in long-term education and job training.

ARTS

Barbea Williams

Being a choreographer, costume designer, dancer and face painter, I believe our stories will only continue to be heard if we listen as our art forms and movements reflect and respond to others' lyrics and instruments.

The Sankofa Bird tells us to "Go back and get it"—not only our culture and history, but also the resources from the desert, mountains and urban dwellings that nature, animals and humans generate. Being a veteran advocate of the arts and culture that works in conjunction with my personal environmental concerns, I say look at what already exists on our planet, then reuse and recycle.

We can't say "promote a healthy planet" enough, and the levels of creativity generated have our audiences surprised, pleased and on their feet.

When I look at a garment, I see fabric, color, texture and potential design; there is no shame in reconstructing discarded set props; their life span can be continued through re-paint, add a throw, three dimensional and/or found projects.

As artists, we continue to be employed and Mother Nature's cycle of life is used to replenish itself. We sustain what we have already accumulated.

Barbea Williams is dedicated to sharing ethnic dance, theater and visual cultural traditions that derive from Africa and the African Diaspora—as an arts educator, performing artist and face painter. She offers various classes, workshops and residences specializing in African and African Latino cultural expressions.

COMMUNITY WELL-BEING

Dr. Carlos Gonzales

I believe Tucson has a long history of appreciating cultural diversity, valuing people's community contributions and their worth as human beings; this tradition needs to continue.

My family has been experiencing life in this community for six generations. I am part Mexican, part Yaqui and a small part Anglo. Van Alstine Street downtown is named after my great great-grandfather.

It hasn't always been perfect—especially in hard economic times. In the mid-'60s we were punished for speaking Spanish at Government Heights Elementary (Hollinger). Then in the '80s the community fell in love with Tucson Meet Yourself—a gathering downtown to share music, culture and food. We need to keep expanding this celebration of diversity, adding our new immigrants and neighbors.

Recently we have seen our politicians passing laws that devalue certain sectors of our population. It is painful and sad to watch. To be a more respectful community we need to rid ourselves of laws like SB1070 and HB2281 (the law against ethnic studies).

Then I remember there is a Mexican saying: "No ha mal, que bien no viene" or "There is no bad out of which good cannot come." These laws have led to a reinvigorated Chicano movement.

I agree with our sheriff who stated that vitriol has become our main form of political discussion. There is hope; the young people I teach in my UA classes don't use this vitriol. We need to make sure that this respectfulness sticks with our young—seeking commonality and not more polarity.

Carlos R. Gonzales, M.D., is an associate professor in Family and Community Medicine at the UA College of Medicine, and director for Curriculum and Community-Based Education. He is also an advisor on traditional Indian and Western medicine collaboration.