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# My opinion Sam Negri: How can we fix Tucson?

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It was with a clenched jaw and a stiff neck that we approached the report and recommendations of the Tucson Regional Town Hall, a document released to the public on Wednesday.

After all, the town hall, a meeting that involved approximately 160 participants selected from a much larger group of applicants, had spent roughly 30 hours in May focused on issues that are hardly new to Tucson residents.

The group plowed a well-tilled field that included concerns about our future water supply, the education of our children, the availability of health care, and the development of a modern transportation system.

In the past, Tucson has typically taken a balloon approach to these subjects, which is to say that we stuff them into a long thin balloon and occasionally squeeze here or there, causing one of the issues to bubble out and catch our attention.

What made the Regional Town Hall intriguing is that it seemed to burst the balloon. In effect, the participants said, let's not talk about only water or only access to health care, and let's not argue for the hundredth time about our need for better roads and mass transit.

Instead, let's throw the whole thing into the middle of the room like a pile of fabric and then begin the laborious task of sorting through which pieces are worth discarding and which ones really contribute to improving the big quilt that Tucson represents.

We cannot say anyone will be startled by the findings in the town hall report. But that's less a reductive statement than it is an acknowledgement, sadly, that the region's problems have remained more or less constant for years.

For example, the highest priority, the participants decided, was the need to improve education. Well, talk about a well-tilled field.

We've heard it repeatedly, and most of us have seen that some high school kids can't even count out the correct amount of change when the cash register tells them how much is due back to the customer. We all know that far too many kids graduate from high school still unable to write a simple declarative sentence or solve basic math problems.

So the need to make education the top priority cannot be repeated too often or too forcefully. But this topic and all of the discussions must produce more than just another pile of paperwork. A sense of urgency, fueled by an appreciation for the region's continuing growth and chagrin over past failures, made the participants acutely aware of the need for action.

It is impossible to overstate the importance of building a community that remains focused on the need to convert talk into practical decisions. In the past, we've tended to react to problems later rather than sooner, in the process creating the negative consequences we then criticize and organize town hall discussion groups to address.

It's a closed loop that needs to be broken.

The town hall discussions were initiated by the Southern Arizona Leadership Council, or SALC, and conducted under the sponsorship of 33 public and private organizations, including the Arizona Daily Star. Each of these groups has a vested interest in practical results.

Some of the town hall recommendations, which we will list below, are more concrete than others. Those that are vague will be refined by special-interest groups. The organizers anticipate that those groups will then become active advocates for specific change "and assume primary accountability for their issue area," the town hall report said.

Among the recommendations are these:

- Strive to make the Tucson region the arts and cultural center of Arizona ... and "value the humanities equally with science and technology."
- Develop alternative routes between Interstate 10 and the Barraza-Aviation Parkway to allow Downtown streets to be clean, pedestrian-friendly and better able to move traffic.
- Urge governments to "consider allocating greater tax resources to arts, culture and recreation because of the scarcity of corporate headquarters and large foundations in the Tucson region."
- Provide a mix of housing types Downtown for all income levels.
- Support efforts to return water to the Santa Cruz River, creating a true "Rio Nuevo."
- Undertake "a highly public education process" to change public attitudes and behaviors toward the use, reuse and management of water.
- Consider numerous additional funding sources for transportation needs, "including bonding, federal money, toll roads, raising the gas tax, increasing the vehicle license tax, increasing driver's license fees through reduced renewal periods, parking-permit increases, surcharges on moving violations, impact fees and other strategies."

Numerous other recommendations were made and will be fleshed out during the coming months.

None of the recommendations, however, was more important than the need to raise the education level in the region.

If we look at the vision that many have for the future, we can see that it is not possible to realize unless we have better educated and more involved parents, more efficient school district management, and high-quality teachers at all grade levels.

The region cannot hope to attract high-end corporations and good jobs if it has a reputation as an enclave with a semi-literate population of high school graduates with mediocre communications, math and science skills.

Neither can it hope to keep its young adults here after graduation if greater economic opportunity and cultural stimulation can be found elsewhere.

In the end, the town hall discussion pointed to a simple fact: The Tucson region must do more for itself.

The town hall that SALC put together dealt with much of what we already know, including the belief that there is considerable talent in our region. It also illustrated that there is a nucleus of individuals who are genuinely concerned with the future.

Those participants were a fraction of a much larger group that is ready to set aside the cynicism of the past and finally address the future as though we will all be here forever. For that, future generations will be thankful.

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