

## ENVISIONING/COCHISE COUNTY

### WHAT ARE YOUR IDEAS FOR HOW THE COMMUNITY SHOULD CHANGE OR GROW?

**Fred Miller**

I believe that Cochise County, as a governmental entity, has an historic opportunity to take a leading role in shaping economic development in the county.

Relying on private interests that will seek to develop various businesses according to their own individual needs of capital return is what I call the *chaos* system of economic development. It has little planning about what is actually good for the underlying health and future of the entire county. It is micro development based on a very narrow view of the future. It is short term planning with a few in mind.

Counterposed to that is what I call a *sustainable* system of economic development. The mission is deliberate planning to grow a stable economy that is built on the nature and history of our area, the work force availability, the centrality of education, and an analysis of the needs of the area as well as an industrial sector analysis. It is long term planning with all of us in mind, inclusive.

Any sound planning will have components of the two systems. However the County has the responsibility to project long term for the needs of residents.

With leadership, energy, and commitment from the county there are two sectors that could be built into a thriving economic engine that provides the jobs, capital, stabilization of a rural lifestyle, and future development of our county.

The first sector is growing a sustainable/organic agriculture sector. The second is building a research and industrial solar energy industry.

#### **SULPHUR SPRINGS VALLEY: ORGANIC OASIS**

Sulphur Springs Valley is an existing agricultural production area in Eastern part of the County. The major crops continue to be grains, however fruits and vegetables have become important also. Livestock is primarily cattle, roughly 48,000 head, with some sheep and hogs raised. There are a number of functioning organic farms in the valley.

The transportation infrastructure already exists to be able to service a growing agriculture area. The county and state road system is initially adequate to

handle truck traffic. Access to nearby I-10 is literally minutes away from most parts of the valley. Union Pacific runs trains near Wilcox and it would be a simple matter of volume to enable transporting products to Tucson and points North and West. The Bisbee airport is capable of handling light freight planes for more perishable commodities.

A ready local market is available for organic products. Numerous restaurants, supermarkets, and specialty stores could carry products. Exports from the county to the rest of the state and beyond could add millions of dollars of income throughout the county. The tax base for the county would be significantly affected.

Encouraging agriculture production to preserve the existing rural lifestyle is a necessity to prevent the kind of hodge-podge housing so evident in Hereford and Palaminas. The Sulphur Springs area could be a national showcase for how to develop and market regionally produced organic food. In a relatively short time, county residents would have access to locally produced health food.

Within Cochise County there is a trend toward an increase in smaller farms- which favor organic production, and a decrease in large farms. As of the latest 2002 Department of Agriculture 5 year statistics, the amount of land in production has decreased to 970,000 acres while the number of farms has increased to 950. Further analysis of the agricultural situation can be found on page 42 of the Center for Economic Research publication, Bisbee Outlook, 2007 available as a download at this website <http://www.cochise.edu/ceer>.

There are economic, health, energy, and environmental reasons to promote organic agricultural.

Economically, sales of organic food, including beef, have grown dramatically over the last decade—soaring from \$3 billion in 1997 to more than \$10 billion in 2003, according to the U.S. Department of Agriculture. Sales of organic food have grown by 20 percent annually and experts predict that the industry's share of the U.S. food market is expected to grow from about 2 percent to roughly 3.5 percent by the end of the decade. Once a net exporter of organic products, the United States now spends more than \$1 billion a year to import organic food, according to the USDA, and the ratio of imported to exported products is now about 8-to-1. There is a huge market for vegetables and meat just waiting to be serviced. It is a wonderful opportunity.

Our health is at risk eating food that has been grown with the aid of agricultural chemicals. In several studies, it has been found that humans have detectable residues of agricultural pesticides in their body. In one 2004 study of 10 infant umbilical cords, detectable levels of more than 200 industrial and agricultural chemicals were found. Some of these chemicals are carcinogenic, mutagenic,

and teratogenic at extremely small doses. It simply is good health policy to minimize the ingestion of these substances.

Energy costs are increasing prices for food. It has been estimated that every American consumes food that has been grown more than 1500 miles from where they live. A recent casual survey of fresh food available at a local supermarket, I found food that has been transported from Italy, Australia, and Chile. There were no local products. The energy costs of food transportation are staggering.

Environmentally, water and air are polluted by agricultural chemicals, top soil is lost due to production methods, and soil health depleted.

Water is available in the Douglas and Wilcox basin. There is some evidence of a depletion in ground water due to draw downs from agriculture and population increase. Obviously there would have to be serious study of the effect of increased agriculture in the area. And close cooperation with the State water authorities would be necessary. However organic farming methods utilize far less water than conventional farming. Additionally, large scale water harvesting could be done which would supplement and add to existing ground water.

Cochise County can utilize many methods to encourage an organic/sustainable food sector to emerge. Utilizing favorable tax incentives for land owners, low cost loans to farms, grants to first time farmers, low-cost land leases, ads to attract organic farmers, as well as combinations of state and federal aid.

The county could encourage existing farmers and ranchers to switch to organic methods, usually a 3 year 'transition' period is necessary to move from conventional pesticide-intensive methods to organic ones. This also pertains to beef cattle as well as pigs, sheep, and lambs.

A casual labor hall-based on traditional union hiring halls, funded by farmers, the county, and the state, could be established to help businesses with seasonal labor demands. Any resident willing to work in the fields would sign up. If not enough county residents signed up to work, Mexican green card workers could be recruited and routed through the labor hall.

A revitalized agriculture sector would also bring other businesses that service the sector with a myriad of services from implements and bookkeeping to restaurants. This would revitalize several small towns.

And illegal migration could impacted in a positive way. As a growing organic agriculture sector in Cochise County became successful, it would attract development capital to expand into Mexico along the County border. Migrant workers bent on looking for work would be absorbed into this agriculture

development, thereby slowing migration to the United States. One of the main ways to halt Illegal migration is to develop intensive agriculture and industrial sectors in a 50-100 mile band from the US border into Mexico. Migrant workers would not leave Mexico if there is work.

At the center of this agriculture sector as well as the solar industry sector is Cochise College. A recent bond issue to build more buildings and improve the campuses was defeated because the college did not link the needed facilities to the specific economic growth in the area. A new bond issue directly related to facility need linked to these two new sectors would easily be passed by the voters, once they were convinced that economic growth would benefit all county residents and the college was an integral and propulsive part of this growth.

#### **SOLAR INDUSTRY AND RESEARCH**

With the recent announcement of a huge solar plant to be built near Phoenix by a Spanish company and another large plant scheduled to be built in New Mexico, it is clear that the race is on to make use of the abundant free natural resource available in our area; the sun. Cochise County can seize opportunities to attract both research and solar industry to the area. Again with Cochise College as a catalyst providing training and education to provide intellectual and manual workers, a solar sector could flourish here for years to come.

There is an abundance of available research and development money for solar energy. Additionally Representative Giffords in CD8, has made it a priority for her in Congress, to bring solar development and federal money to Arizona and to her district. She will be a valuable ally in developing a solar sector in Cochise County.

There are far more knowledgeable people than I who detail how this could happen, suffice to say that this could be another staple of Cochise County economic development.

One other area of interest is alternative health and body care, another growing market. With many practitioners already in the Bisbee, it could be a prime area for health spas, alternative treatment clinics, and other health/body related activities such as a yoga institute and massage school. The year round clean air, sunshine, and affordable housing all make this an attractive development option.

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