

PINAL COUNTY LIFESTYLES
MAY 2009

Welcome and best of fortune to the Graduates of 2009. As you raise your head from your books, computer screens, emerge from your classrooms, and think about the next phase of your academic career and/or your life – I know that the picture around you seems somewhat bleak and challenging. Although it may not provide you with much reassurance, it must be noted that other graduates from your school or institution of learning have faced similar economic and employment outlooks in the past. In the end, hard work, diligent persistence, and creative energy is what saves the day. Small comfort, I'm sure, but it's true.

The Editors of *Pinal County Lifestyles* have invited all of this month's contributors to share "memorable events, trends, etc." about our area in order to provide you with a sort of time capsule for reflections in the years to come as you look back to this time of graduation. The balance of this month's column will unfortunately be devoted to some of the less-than-positive trends and challenges that mark this point in time for the residents of our county.

I'd like to start with the process that will lead to a FY 2009-10 budget for the county. As you know by now, all county departments and elected officials submitted budgets that reflected significant reductions since our revenue projections reflect a continued downturn in the economy. Some of the measures ordered and/or already implemented by the Board of Supervisors: a hiring freeze for all departments and offices (with the exception of the Sheriff's Office) which has been implemented; capital projects (except those funded by outside sources) have been put on hold; county vehicles are no longer permitted for take home programs (with rare exception) which has been implemented; those county employees who might be eligible for retirement have been offered an early retirement incentive package.

The Board has also reluctantly authorized the County Manager to proceed with a plan to lay off a number of employees at the end of this current fiscal year. Affected employees will be notified in mid-June; however, other measures may be necessary. The Board has been monitoring the Arizona legislative process in order to thoroughly assess the local consequences and potential impacts of various bills as our legislators wrestle with their budget and revenue deficits. The bottom line is that this year's budget cycle (and, I suspect, next year's budget as well) will be the most challenging one we've had in several decades.

In addition to the challenges outlined above, I work closely with the County's management team evaluating various suggestions and options for maximizing our efficiency while minimizing our operational costs. Not all proposals result in real savings: the concept of furloughs sounds attractive; while this may result in reducing the immediate outlay of wages, the net result is often merely a postponement of liabilities on the benefits side. Recent Board discussions on some federal stimulus grant programs outlined some of those same considerations of potential unintended consequences.

What other kinds of contemporary issues confronted the Class of 2009? The massive deceleration of our economy – particularly in the housing and construction sectors – rippled throughout Pinal County. Not only were housing and property sales affected, but food prices rose at the same time agricultural profits all but disappeared as energy costs escalated “into the stratosphere” as some pundits put it. The layoff of employees often led to the loss of homes and, perhaps coincidentally, statistics showed increases in crime, domestic violence, child abuse, and other anti-social behaviors.

In the meantime, the County Board of Supervisors continued work on its Comprehensive Plan, Zoning Ordinances, and other policies in anticipation of a revived and vibrant economy. These very public processes took place at the same time as the county braced for an edict from the Environmental Protection Agency, declaring Pinal to be in violation of standards for PM₁₀ dust in our air. The Board and staff met regularly with stakeholders and state legislators to adopt mitigation measures and best management practices (BMPs) in advance of the EPA edict. Their goal was to minimize the area of the county to be impacted by the EPA’s regulations as well as to work to ensure the economic viability of our county’s economy while supporting efforts to see that future generations of Pinal County residents have clean and clear air to breathe.

Here’s to the Class of 2009 – may you be the best graduates ever from Pinal County!

David Snider

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