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EDITOR'S PICK

ALERT

Tucson Opinion

## Si Schorr: Regionalism within Pima County is at a crossroads

By Si Schorr Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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*The following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:*

In 1974, the Tucson City Council and the Pima County Board of Supervisors established the Commission on Improved Governmental Management (“CIGM”); a citizens’ commission charged with studying the alternatives for improving the local governance.

CIGM found that citizens were often confused by the systems and frustrated by the conflict and competition between the city of Tucson and Pima County. CIGM evaluated a wide range of local governmental models, including incorporation, annexation, and the use of inter-governmental agreements.

Bruce Wright, a deputy director of CIGM and now a retired University of Arizona associate vice president, recalls that after much deliberation and debate, the commission recommended consolidating the city and county into a single unified government.

CIGM was successful in securing the necessary enabling legislation from the Arizona Legislature to present the proposal for consolidated government to the voters of Pima County. However, the idea of unified government died a quiet death as the city of Tucson supported the concept while Pima County opposed it.

Most of the conclusions reached by the commission in 1976 still ring true today. The recommendations focused on the importance of regionalism in advancing through a unified effort, economic, water, sewer, transportation, planning, and environmental protection.

The county and city embraced the concept of the functional consolidation in a limited number of areas where there was an obvious duplication of government services. For example, a 1979 Intergovernmental Agreement between the city and the county was established on the assumption that the county would provide the regional sewer service and the city would provide regional water service. While there have been other successful regional efforts including tourism, attractions, libraries, and parks and recreation, the most significant example of regionality at its best was the revitalized Regional Transportation Authority (RTA), which was approved in 2004 by the state Legislature.

There have also been setbacks including the short-lived joint City-County planning and zoning commission (on which I served), and the Metropolitan Utilities Management System, established in 1976 and then dissolved.

The preexisting RTA, never functional, gave the city and county what was tantamount to a veto authority. This was changed in 2004 when Tucson Mayor Bob Walkup successfully urged that the membership of the RTA board be identical to the membership of the Pima Association of Government (“PAG”) Regional Council (all 9 members).

The RTA board went on to establish two committees to assist with the development of the 20-year RTA plan. A Citizens Advisory Committee and a Technical/Management Committee (co-chaired by Tucson and Pima County representatives) were formed to consider and evaluate the recommended regional projects.

Parenthetically it was not intended that the RTA would preempt local jurisdictions and effect their ability to solve their local problems. Indeed, the City has done this over the past several years by passing bond issues to meet these needs.

The efforts over the years to pursue and improve cooperative regionality within Pima County are now at a critical juncture. Recently the city has discussed the possibility of making substantial policy changes in transportation that could undermine intergovernmental and regional cooperation.

The city has implicitly threatened to withdraw from the RTA if their concerns are not met. This would sound the death knell of not only the RTA, but future efforts at cooperative regionalization in Pima County. Such would not bode well for the prosperity and growth of our region and the efforts over the many years to pursue and improve cooperative regionality within Pima County.

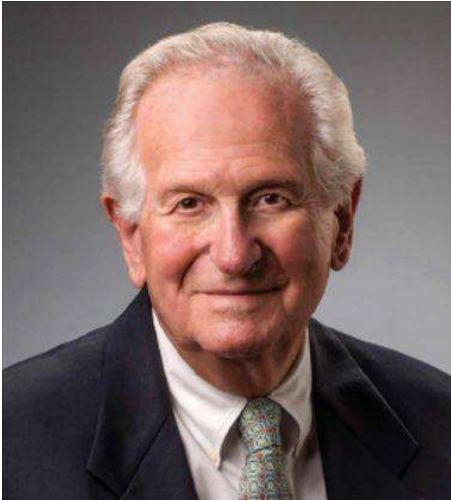
In considering all of these matters and in preparation for RTA reauthorization by 2026, the RTA board should consider: Was the city dealt with fairly by the enactment of the 2006 RTA plan? Did it receive its fair share of road, transit, streetcar, sidewalks, bus pullouts, etc.? In my view, as a longtime Tucson resident, I am convinced Tucson did. I think the current governance system has worked very well and that the RTA has been an overwhelming success in dealing with regional transportation issues.

The city has also proposed significant changes to the RTA structure, including changing the voting method to consider a weighted voting system where jurisdictions with higher populations have more say and instead of designating specific projects and roads seeks flexibility in project description plans. It is questionable whether either of these proposals would be allowed without a change to Arizona law.

Moreover, it is doubtful whether the citizen voters would approve projects without knowing exactly what they were voting on. One of the prime reasons the RTA enjoyed the support of the voters at the ballot box in 2006 was the fact that the voters knew exactly what projects were being offered. In the interest of furthering regional consensus, the RTA should revisit its voting structure and consider technology advances and other city concerns.

Beyond the outcomes of the issues currently under consideration by the city of Tucson, future efforts at cooperative regionalization in Pima County are currently at stake as well as our shared prosperity, economic growth and vitality. These issues are not

confined to jurisdictional lines and should be considered and resolved by regional consensus. We are at a crossroads. RTA did it in 2006; let's do it again.



## Schorr

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