

Growth - good or bad? Creating victims or villains

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Did you move to Colorado Springs because a homebuilder built a house?
Of course not. No one else has either.

A recent survey conducted for Fox21 TV by professional pollsters MM&C revealed that the top three reasons that people moved here were the "presence of military bases", "outdoor recreation-lifestyle" and "environmental qualities". Picture someone now living somewhere else thinking "I want to move to another community. Let me think, where are houses being built? Oh, yes, in Colorado Springs. I'll move there." That's not logical.

It's silly to think that preparing for population growth causes that growth, as our anti-growth community would have us believe. People pursue an improved quality of life and jobs, not homes. Homes are only built in response to population growth. Yet anti-growth activists blame builders and developers for population growth and blame the public sector for providing the services needed by the families moving into those homes and the employers that give them jobs. Blaming them is like blaming a schoolteacher for the growing number of school children in her classroom. Students must be taught and she does so. That's her role, just as the role of the development community is to provide homes and buildings to meet needs created by others.

So, what should be our attitude about growth? The results of population growth are neither all positive nor all negative. Those who think the negative consequences of growth are more important than the positive consequences need to tell us how they would stop it. Reviewing the Fox21/MM&C survey, the top ten reasons that people stay in Colorado Springs are all the same as the reasons that people came in the first place, with one exception-proximity to Denver moved into the top-ten as a reason to stay.

So, population control advocates must be telling us that we need to remove the attractive aspects of the community, to stop population growth, by:

- Throwing out the military bases
- Removing access to outdoor recreation
- Intentionally ruining the environment
- Prohibiting the practice of "conservative family values
- Making the airport inconvenient, or closing it
- Throwing out all national international religious 'organizations
- Destroying the quality of K12 education, and eliminate our sense of community

Also, Gardner and his antigrowth cronies must be saying that we should raise our taxes to put up a fence and post police forces around the city to prevent anyone in unless someone else first moved out. And they must be demanding that government deny couples the right to have a child until someone in the community dies.

Population growth and economic growth are not the same. Lack of economic growth is harmful to communities, whether growing in population or not. Population growth in a community will happen unless the community is, or decides to make itself, unattractive.

Who would want that? If population grows, responsible communities accommodate the needs of the new people through economic growth and investment in public infrastructure. They pursue higher income jobs to allow families to make their housing and car payments, to enjoy their lives and to send their children to college. EDC was pleased to announce over 2000 new jobs for the community in 2004, ninety percent going to current residents, according to the employers: The average salaries of those jobs will be one third higher than the county average. Globally competitive employers provide those good jobs. They can only succeed in communities that create and pay for good education systems, build good roads, and air travel infrastructure, provide water, electricity and gas, and wastewater services, that create and sustain competitive tax and regulatory policies and that retain talented people by creating and supporting arts, culture, recreation, and institutions that provide intellectual stimulation.

They don't, as our anti-growth activists do, oppose funding the improvement of roads and reduction of traffic congestion. Anti-growth advocates, led by Dave Gardner, opposed the successful election for that purpose last November.

They don't, as Gardner and our anti-growth activists do, advocate a \$60,000 increase in the price of a new home needed by a neighbor's grown child, or a couple adapting to an empty nest, or the family of an incoming soldier, who risks his life for his country. The message is "make developers pay!" But developers don't pay those charges, homebuyers pay them. Homes won't be built for a loss, just like teachers and doctors shouldn't and won't work for free. The cost is passed on. The profit in the cost of an average home isn't even close to \$60,000. The preferred alternative to huge hookup costs is modest changes in rates that are paid by a community that receives benefits from its growth.

Gardner and his group support increasing the cost of utility hookups, for companies that create our jobs, by a factor of ten, seriously threatening future jobs and economic growth.

Economic growth is always positive. Higher incomes allow for better personal and family quality of life and for better public services through a higher tax contribution per person.

Population growth has positive aspects, whether controllable or not. It results in more choices for medical care, for arts, culture, recreation, shopping, entertainment, and education, among many other goods and services. Alternatively, for example, a patient in a small community who needs to travel a long distance to visit a medical specialist pays a price for the lack of population in his community.

Population growth poses challenges as well. They must be addressed, much like we all need to take care of ourselves as we inevitably age. High quality growth must be a non-negotiable community priority. Quality growth requires appropriate regulation. It requires investments in roads, schools, utilities, parks and other public assets that accommodate the needs and desires of additional people, whether they come through birth or migration. Assuming the same level of parental involvement, the primary source of student success, under-funded schools with growing enrollment will produce graduates that can't offer the skills needed by the employers that drive our economy. Everyone is hurt by an unprepared worker, not just the individual. If she earns less, she contributes less in taxes to cover the costs of public services that she uses.

Water shortages in Colorado and the West are cited as a reason to stop growth, a bad idea. A better approach is to charge all of us what it actually costs to use water, through our rates. The market will make the adjustments necessary, resulting in enough water for everyone through increased conservation, new technology; (increasing reuse and use efficiency) and the transfer of available water to its highest and best use (90% of water in Colorado is now used for agriculture. An 11 % increase in agricultural water use efficiency would support twice the population, not including the impacts of conservation. If water becomes too expensive for consumers to pay, growth will get smarter and more efficient or it will stop.

There are people in our community whose view is that we should pay no more taxes, for any reason. They have a right to that opinion. If their opinions prevail, however, the failure to make needed public investments will have seriously negative consequences for quality of life. Taxes are a means to an end, not an end in themselves. Taxes taken from the producing part of society are a drag on its economy and should only be justified if they create a public benefit that is more than the drag, they create. Government should be held strictly accountable for poorly spent tax revenue. But it is the citizens in this state and community who, living under a TABOR regime, must hold themselves accountable for inadequate investment in roads, schools, parks, utilities and other community infrastructure. And, as voters, they must hold themselves accountable for the actions of those they elect who fail to inform them of the consequences of underinvestment, in mindless deference to a "no new taxes" mantra.

Regrettably, many of the problems that are being blamed on growth are not the fault of population growth. They are the fault of those who chose to not make the investments needed to support additional people, when it is clear that population growth in an attractive community is inevitable in a community that doesn't want to destroy its quality of life to keep people out.

Those who say we shouldn't invest to support more people are, unwittingly, suggesting we should deliberately pursue a lower quality of life. Ironically, the result of that lower quality of life may indeed achieve the preferred objective of the David Gardners of this community. Population would decline as people choose to leave for better communities. We will have "burned the village in order to save it".

The choices for Colorado Springs are simple: Grow prosperously by responsibly accommodating the population growth that is inevitable in an attractive community, or intentionally make the community unattractive.

Gardner and his anti-growth allies are planning to offer us that choice. The people of Colorado Springs care enough about their quality of life and that of their children and grandchildren to reject his ill-advised populist message. They won't take a bite from that poisoned apple.