

## What's the Point?

Maybe to start with, it's the point Saul Alinsky made when he advised citizens who were at the point of getting actively into some issue to ask themselves before opening their mouths in public, "Do you want to make a point, or do you want to make a difference?"

It's not exactly a secret among people who know me that I've got a thing about meetings, especially those that purport to bring together all the "stakeholders" in some issue, giving all a voice — including those responsible for causing the problem in the first place and still profiting from its continuance, so that any group consensus or statement will *per force* include the will of the main perps. Democracy in action. Replete with token advocates of some non-majority positions.

It's not that the meetings shouldn't be held. They should. And in particular should be attended by people with a dog in the fight who aren't as burned-out as I am after 10, these many years. Elbows get rubbed, ideas exchanged, points-of-view at least expressed and maybe acknowledged. Commitments sometimes made. Deals cut. But so often, and increasingly it seems (but maybe that's just me), they become not exactly pointless but beside the point. The point being, as Marx famously sort of said, to change things, especially when, but hopefully before, conditions are so unacceptable that any change would seem to be a change for the better.

A case in point. I was recently in one such get-together, a confab put on and moderated by professional get-together specialists who assembled thirty or forty participants (stakeholders, aka "sides" ) representing five or six of the generally recognized local population groups in the valley where I live — primarily defined in tax base sectoral terms and alternately as "communities" within the the broader sense of the valley populace in toto, while more or less avoiding the sectarian, ideological and partisan splits rampant in the valley, as well as the game-changing division between the regulatory regimes in the valley's two groundwater basins, but including, as noted, the usual well-heeled principal suspects and their subcontractors, clients, dependents, et al. Format: plenary-breakout-plenary-breakout-plenary, with some sort of report to come out somewhere down the line.

In short, a typically "balanced" get-together, this one comprised of big ("consolidated") ag, small/family ag (combining farmers and ranchers), residential (combining traditional and "homesteader"), and municipal/county representatives, to share our thoughts; not our thoughts on how to solve the main problem on all our minds — namely, the rapid removal of a critical environmental resource caused by legal but environmentally devastating extraction of said resource by and for the profit of a few private concerns (count them on one hand) in the consolidated ag sector. The endangered resource in question being groundwater, the sole source of which in our high desert drought-stricken valley is rain.

No, rather than trying to deal directly with that ape in the room, the we were tasked with engaging in a sort of disaster prep-and-plan exercise that reminded me of my days as the County's Emergency Services director thirty years ago or so. The point in this one: to make guesses on how those impacted by the groundwater problem (i.e., us) might be expected to cope

with it in the relatively foreseeable future under different degrees of groundwater depletion and changes in the economic well-being of Valleyites, assuming, it went without saying, continuance of the same growth-forever, private profit *uber alles* economic and political fundamentalism that brought us to the mess we're now in, a system in which those with the most money (aka, power, aka God-given right) are free to take as much public resource as they want regardless of the cost to humans and others. Free enterprise (aka, the Tragedy of the Commons).

Talk, as expected, centered on survival or not of the small farmer sector in the face of disappearing groundwater, but I couldn't shake the feeling that our focus should have been the broader socio-economic framework and rather obvious (to me) fact that unless that framework is changed, the most probable scenario for the valley's future is community only in a narrow familial and tribalist sense, a system not unlike the old Monopoly Capitalism of mining conglomerates in the last century (better known these days as Neoliberalism): company towns; philanthropy for schools and other public interests; company stores replaced by company-operated water districts and contracts for reliable suppliers of company needs; declensions of class and caste based on income level and other decisions made in company board rooms responsive to investor interests and CEO salaries. A sort of benevolent dictatorship with market values taking the place of benevolence.

To be fair, the confab was never intended to provide any movement toward or magic key for averting that scenario or otherwise improving the immediate debacle, let alone ending it. We were not, after all, at the state legislature (where good ideas get made into sausage) but in a building of one of the three thriving churches in a typical rural western town of 300 that has lost a third of its residents in the past fifty years or so, closed several businesses during the pandemic, and now has a Family Dollar.

And there's something to be said for just getting all sides into the same room and overt efforts toward inclusiveness — including, for instance, the vegan burritos on the lunch table alongside the beef. And I did notice during the final plenary that it could not have been by chance that none of the most prominent anti-regulation supporters of the mega-pumpers were at any of the breakout sessions I was in. And that, in combination with the open forum format of the process made it comfortable enough for me, as well as the one or two other token environmentalists present, to slip a few recondite ideas into a couple of breakouts. For instance, the idea that at least some open space and natural habitat ought to take precedence over commodity production — an idea that drew comments about lucrative eco-tourism or, in real estate and urban planning jargon, “green” or “open space.”

The idea that land could be beneficially reserved not for commodity production or human occupation but natural habitat for its own sake, grasslands restored not for cattle but for natural diversity of native species, drew some muted acknowledgment, but that it should be so reserved didn't pass the no comment test. The notion that non-human animals might deserve at least consideration never got brought up either, and advocacy for non-human equality or rights was an obvious non-starter. As one participant put it in a separate discussion, "what's good for people: that's all that matters." I refrained from pointing out that what's good for people must include environmental integrity.

As far as I know, there were no Native Americans present and no discussion of Indigenous agricultural methods.

At one point it occurred to me that the only time in the meeting I'd heard the word "sustainability" was in regard not to the environment but to the ag community at large and more or less meaning its persistence, longevity, survival, etc. After a moment of reflection, I decided that it to insert the ecological meaning of the word into the conversation would likely be a futile gesture and most certainly wouldn't provoke fruitful discussion about the utter dependency of economics on environment.

In one breakout session I did mention steady-state economics, a model based on the sustainable flow of energies and other resources within natural systems to assure that natural systems are self-sustaining. That model, I said, might well be a viable alternative to the forever-growth model. After some silence around the table, the moderator offered "circular economy" as a possible synonym; I agreed, and then we moved on.

In another breakout session I brought up as a possible starting point to address the main problem, Public Trust Doctrine — the venerable concept informing Arizona's 1980 groundwater law: i.e., that groundwater belongs to the public, not to private owners of the land above it. While most at the table recalled that something in state law called public trust lands were a source of revenue for public schools, none chose to pursue possible implications of the doctrine for our groundwater issue. Again we moved on.

Back to the point then,

Maybe the tipping point (aka, point of no return), the point at which the straw breaks the camel's back. For instance, the tipping point of climate collapse that scientists and tree huggers warned about fifty years ago that now has already been passed. "The gates of hell," said UN Secretary-General António Guterres yesterday, "humanity has opened." Glaciers and polar icecaps melting away, ocean currents shifting, ocean levels rising, disrupted, ecosystems destroyed, deforestation, desertification, myriad lifeforms gone extinct, heat domes, plagues, droughts, floods, fires, with worse yet to come. From greenhouse gases, a lot of which come from livestock.

It's common knowledge that many valley residents say climate change is a media chimera or political hoax, but I was disappointed that they didn't even pick it as a major factor in upcoming conditions and actions in the valley. And surprised to hear one grower — widely-recognized as one of the few "progressive" farmers in the valley (i.e., already experimenting with more sustainable alt ag: growing native, low-water-use crops, retiring crop acreage, calling for an end in the valley to water-thirsty crops like alfalfa, corn and cotton, etc.) — insist that climate change is only a phase in a cycle like those that have occurred in prehistory as well as in the relatively recent past.

Or maybe the tipping point marking the San Pedro River's death (again, long warned about but already passed). Commercial, residential and especially military overpumping taking more out

than was put back in for the past sixty years or so, and now, short of a Biblical monsoon, even if all pumping in the watershed stopped tomorrow, we will never see the river's essential groundwater restored to where it was just a few decades ago. It probably shouldn't go without saying that a goodly number of people in that valley as well as mine believe that such divine intervention can and likely will occur,

Sidebar: Two decades of concerted best intentions and efforts by SP Basin powers-that-be (Ft Huachuca, Sierra Vista, Cochise County, Hereford NRCD, UA Waterwise program, et al) — low-flush toilets, xeriscaped yards, multimillion dollar triage recharge projects, stakeholder participation and cooperation, and the river is still dwindling away. At a slower rate, they say, than before all the technical fixes and stakeholder input, but nearer death every day and the groundwater table still dropping,

Or maybe the tipping point for the Willcox Basin which, again, short of a Biblical deluge, even if all the pumping stopped tomorrow, will never have, certainly not in the lifetime of anyone now living, anywhere near as much groundwater as it had even as recently as twenty-five years ago.

Sidebar: one company (a dairy and feedlot operation (Concentrated Animal Feeding Operation, CAFO, in legalese, stinkyard in the local demotic) that raises alfalfa for its tens of thousands of head of cattle) owns outright some 70% of the irrigated land in the Willcox Basin and irrigates even more through contracts with other growers, pumping from depths and at rates that in only a few years have sucked the already-depleted aquifer down so much lower and faster that residents who can't afford to deepen their wells (some of them farmers whose families have lived here for generations), have had to move out, not a few selling their property and water rights to the deep pocket deep well mega-operation, and some contracting to grow crops for it in exchange for help with deepening their wells and the ability to keep their homesteads.

So, maybe some bullet points are in order.

At what point do we individually and in aggregate admit that the growth-forever model, the cage in which our races are run, is not sustainable? As has been said many times before, endless growth is the m.o. of the cancer cell. What is the turning point at which a politically persuasive number of not just Valleyans but humans everywhere will recognize in words and action that economics is a subheading of ecology and that carrying capacity, anthropic as well as bovine, is one of its main drivers. More and more, bigger and bigger, is not better. Enough is enough.

A few days after our think tank exercise, hundreds of thousands of people all over the world marched to End Fossil Fuels, led by the young, who hope to be alive in a habitable world in 2030, seven years from now, the date science has recognized as the conclusive climate tipping point, beyond which calamity. The global protests targeted corporations, industries, banks, governments, militaries, other institutions and several prominent billionaires, all of which are deeply complicit in production and emission of fossil fuels. The point: get them to stop the killing and start at once doing whatever needs to be done to prevent total collapse. There is no time to waste.

Just as our whole culture, our way of life, is based on fossil fuels, so is it based on a maximum production maximum profit model of continual growth dependent on continually increased subsidies for extraction of natural resources, leading to increased social and environmental degradation, leading to the inevitable results we now see — climate catastrophe with its various increasingly all-too-common emergencies: ecosystem collapse, species extinction, massive wildfires, extreme heat waves, rising overheated oceans, global migration of human and other species, pandemics and other health effects from previously unknown or non-threatening bacterial, viral and fungal organisms. . . .

The basic rule or goal for sustainability is safe yield, no more out than goes in. In banking terms: no overdraft of the account. In hydrological terms: no overdraft of the groundwater. Not putting back as much as we take out has been the fatal flaw of every previous civilization.

We applaud, as a majority of participants in our confab seemed to, water conservation: regenerative agriculture, alternative crops, nozzle and flushing efficiency, leaky pipes repaired, and the like. They are much needed steps toward correcting past insults. But they don't counteract the tipping point. At best, like Reduce Recycle Reuse, they achieve planned depletion, a slower death. Buy a little time. Thumbs in the dike.

In our advanced state of ecological malignancy, achieving sustainability requires more than steady state or safe yield: it requires negative growth, degrowth. More in that out. Not maintaining our socioeconomic status quo — the status quo is what got us where we are — but restoring the environment we've been pillaging for more than a century. Not just groundwater but the environment at large, restoring the integrity of ecosystems and biotic communities. Rewilding. Giving back.

Do the hundreds of thousands in the streets herald the turning point? Is this the leading edge of the moment when we — as a nation, as a species, as individuals — get the point and move into crisis mode, move out of denial, fatalism and funk, actually take action, do our part, make a difference?

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