

New Year Realities in Paso Robles



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Over 120 years ago early Paso Roblans organized a municipal corporation to provide for their mutual protection and welfare. Provision of these common interests came at a price. This article is an attempt to briefly and realistically outline the impacts of the economy upon, and the future costs for providing, some of those fundamental features of community life. It is not a plea for more money, rather a report of what is. Whether anything is to be done, and to what degree, is up to you.

Four years into the recession and the local economy is beginning to stabilize. Retail commerce is increasing, tourism is continuing to brighten, and some manufacturers are prospering. But, the positive turn has not cracked high unemployment, foreclosures, and low property values (yet).

Like many businesses, 'City' revenue took a big hit. Adjustments were made, most significantly a 36% reduction of the workforce down to 1991 levels (when the town had just 19,000 residents), along with a 4-year wage freeze. These and other adjustments, coupled with judicious use of savings, allowed the municipality to weather the recession without breaking the bank. But, there are consequences including inadequate road, park & public building repair, significantly reduced service capacity, and elimination of programs.

Now, however, the economic decline has stopped. A road to recovery is visible, albeit a long road – and one filled with (proverbial) 'potholes.' The projected long, slow recovery will return some of the lost revenues, but not soon enough to 'fill the pot holes' – so, choices have to be made.

For public activities supported by taxes, here are some of the big choices:

Road Repairs

Generally, City road conditions rate about a '60' on a scale of '100'. From school, most recognize 60 out of 100 as a 'D'. And, to make matters worse, road conditions are not static, i.e., they continue to deteriorate. To improve driving conditions, a one-time investment of \$80 Million dollars, PLUS another \$3.2 Million annually for maintenance, would be required.

Police

Currently, there are enough police officers for a community of about 20,000 – but, we number 30,000. So, services are necessarily focused on the most critical matters, and officers are stretched to the limit. To handle the work generated by a City our size, 15 more officers would be needed. That would cost about \$2 Million more per year. And, as population increases, even more officers would be needed.

Emergency Services

Fire suppression, multiple hazard and disaster response, and medical aid for 30,000 people require 30 fire/emergency medical personnel. Currently there are 22. So, to serve the needs, 8 more personnel would be needed at a cost of approximately \$1 Million per year more than today.

Parks & Buildings

Maintenance & Repairs

The City owns and operates 205,000 square feet of buildings plus 170 acres (7.4 Million square feet) of parkland, trails, and open space. Proper maintenance and repair would cost roughly \$5.5 Million annually. Currently, only \$1.5 Million is available. So, another

\$4 Million per year would be required.

If you were to choose to address all these, it would total \$10 Million per year, or 40%, more than comes in today, plus a one-time bounce of \$80 Million. [For context, economic recovery is projected to generate about \$750,000 more per year by 2015.] Importantly, that amount would not cover other costs such as restoring suspended Recreation programs, increasing costs of doing business, or replacing facilities as they wear out.

Also, this is not the end of it. There are other important community issues:

Education

Paso Robles public schools have lost millions of dollars with no reduction of students served. Cuesta College has suffered too. What has resulted is loss of faculty and staff, larger class sizes, fewer class offerings and (possibly) fewer days of instruction. This compromises the preparation of our youth, and the retraining of adults, for future employment and thus the competitiveness of Paso Robles as a place for business and industry.

Unemployment

One of every eleven able-bodied adults is unemployed; even more may be underemployed. And, while economic recovery may spawn new job opportunities, local job growth will be slow and, most likely, in the hospitality, retail and service occupations – occupations with historically low pay. Additionally, the continuing

deterioration of educational opportunities lessens prospects of attracting higher paying jobs as local labor will not be prepared for the demands of higher paying jobs.

Poverty

One in seven lives in poverty (a family of four earning less than \$22,000/year is considered to be in poverty); that's 4,000 Paso Roblans struggling to survive. Sadly, this is not a reality that changed with earlier economic boom times. Something more is needed.

Hunger

One in seven is 'food insecure' (meaning there is limited or uncertain availability/accessibility of nutritionally adequate and safe foods). Thousands of our neighbors and school children go hungry. This too is a reality that has not been eliminated with previous economic recoveries.

Homelessness

Over 700 Paso Roblans, including 300 children, are homeless. Like hunger and poverty, it is a reality that seemingly defies economic recovery.

In the past, economic recovery generated real and substantial increases in private property, commerce, and wealth. But, those private gains did not adequately provide for lasting improvements in education, public safety, infrastructure, and the general welfare. As the current recovery picks up steam, the good news is that workable solutions to these challenges can be found. The question is will you be satisfied with (a repeat of) historical outcomes or do you want something different? It is yours to choose whether, and to what degree, we tackle some or all of these issues of mutual protection and welfare. Future outcomes are yours to make.

For this we should be grateful – grateful that it is up to us, grateful that workable solutions can be found, and grateful that we have the opportunity and capacity to frame our own destiny. We (you) simply need to choose, and then commit to do, what is needed.

NEXT MONTH

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from

Mayor Duane Picanco and Supervisor Frank Mecham

