

# Big Ops

## Joe Snell talks about the future for economic development in Tucson

### How does Tucson's location close to the border effect its economy?

Tucson has a unique opportunity because of the cultural ties that exist. There are many Mexican business owners that have residences in Tucson and Mexico. The impact is significant from a tourism and shopping standpoint. About \$1 million a month is spent here by Mexican visitors. Because of those cultural ties, we have businesses looking to set up in Mexico, that set up in Tucson first. Many find Tucson a diverse and open market.

### What are Tucson's major economic strengths and opportunities?

Strengths far outweigh challenges. I'm a glass-is-half-full kind of guy. The educational system—the University of Arizona has a national reputation as a major research institution. I wouldn't have taken the job as president if there wasn't the UofA. The geographic location—many companies want to serve the West Coast. Those companies can set up operations here and serve California and western markets. We've had a lot of success in the last year. Proximity to Mexico—



we're sitting in a great place to connect western and Mexican markets. We're on the main line for the Union Pacific Railroad. Tucson just hit a million people; it's the 34th largest metropolitan city in the country. We have big-city amenities, but are small enough to react with speed and efficiency. Access to the right people, fast, is a big issue for companies. We have a good quality of life here: great weather, recreation, diversity in the labor force, a lot of bilingual workers and available labor. Arizona as a whole, in the last 30 years, has had explosive growth. In the last 10 years, Tucson has grown 44 percent faster than the rest of the country. When we look at companies looking to expand, that's the No. 1 issue for them—can I find the workers I need?

### What are Tucson's challenges?

Tucson's challenges are similar to the rest of the state, including Phoenix. We need to invest in K-12 education. There's a perception it isn't as strong as it should be. Also, we need to make sure we're able to recruit and

retain the most talented scientific and technical workers we can find. We need to shift from quantity to quality. We've grown, but have we grown wealthier? I think it's starting to happen, but are we going to compete for labor and find the talent we need?

### Tell me about TREO's action plan for ensuring Tucson's economic growth.

TREO is a start-up organization and launched July last year. The roots go back a year before that, though. A blue ribbon panel suggested merging several economic development organizations to act regionally, leverage limited dollars and minimize duplication of services. This is a cutting-edge model—we're doing it all under one umbrella. We're not just a recruitment organization; we spend most of our time on retention and expansion of local industries.

### Why has TREO targeted Mexico, Canada and Europe as good places to do business with?

Our primary focus is targeting local com-

panies and expand or retain them. It ties into our participation in foreign direct investment. We've partnered with Phoenix and Flagstaff to market Arizona as a state. Why do this? The wages are higher than domestic companies. What's good for Phoenix is good for Tucson. I see us as a super region; municipal boundaries don't matter to me.

### Tell me about TREO's economic blueprint that will launch first quarter this year and the community response you expect.

If you look at successful communities with world-class economies, they have a road map for where they want to go. The greatest example is Austin, which is about the size of Tucson. I don't think you'll find a better economy than Austin. I just don't see how we can get to where we want to be without a map. It includes a vision, gap analysis and strategies we need to be competitive. **AB**

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