



Why do S. Ariz. lawmakers take aim at their own constituents?

Steve Kozachik Special To The Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Wednesday, March 16, 2011 12:00 am

Why is the Arizona Legislature taking aim at the city of Tucson?

Why is our "limited government"-minded Legislature considering legislation that will create huge bureaucratic obligations for the city? And why would the Legislature, whose mantra has been making our state a haven for businesses looking to relocate, propose bills that will limit Tucson's ability to attract and retain top quality public service workers, and statutorily cap the number of public sector workers in a way that will impact the city's ability to provide basic services to the community?

This legislative session has been one anti-local statute after another. And now they're defining the proposed laws in a manner that in Southern Arizona can only point to Tucson. In several pieces of legislation, each sponsored by our own local representatives in the Legislature, the target community is specifically defined as follows: "For the purposes of this section, 'city' means a city with a population of more than five hundred thousand persons." (SBs 1345, 1347, 1322.)

Look around. How many jurisdictions in the state, other than Tucson, qualify? Why would our Southern Arizona delegation take aim at their own constituents?

If these bills take effect, the salaries of local public servants would be capped at the salary for each municipal employee in a given position for fiscal year 2006-2007.

The number of workers is to be capped at 0.4 percent of the population of the city. For a city of 500,000 residents, you will be served by a maximum of fewer than 2,500 workers. (Editor's note: the city has been downsizing and now employs the equivalent of 4,516 full-time workers, the same level as in 1998.)

And just to make sure we're complying, the city must annually provide the state a published report that shows the budgeted amount of annual compensation broken out by overtime, benefits and the estimated total amount of annual compensation and benefits paid to private sector employees working within the city - just to ensure the total city payroll is below that of the private sector, on average, per employee.

Oh, and if a member of the general public wants to join in this game of Statutory Pile-On, SB 1345 provides that "taxpayers residing in the City may bring a special action in any court of competent jurisdiction to enforce the municipal employment limit and municipal employee compensation limit." Our own representatives have placed us in the position to be sued by their own constituents.

But not to worry. This same group is about to adopt legislation that will force the city to bid out every municipal service with an "anticipated cost" of over \$75,000. This includes all internal management services, technology services, physical asset services, facilities services, support services, enterprise and fee-funded services and administrative services.

And if the city is to hire employees at 2007 rates of pay, do the boys up in Phoenix really think the private sector will be a bargain for long, if at all?

I am not a big-government proponent. And yet, I have a healthy appreciation for the complexities inherent in operating a municipality the size of Tucson. That takes competent professionals who bring credentials to their work that could be marketed in the private sector. Paying those workers salaries that will fall farther and farther behind those offered by businesses, will guarantee an exodus of quality workers and a consequent diminution of the quality of service offered to the taxpayers.

I do not believe that's good public policy. It strikes me as the sort of oversight given by an absentee landlord; that is, one who has lost touch with the property, and as such makes decisions not based on the best interests of the region.

Note to our delegation: spend some time in your neighborhoods and talk to your constituents. I think you'll hear that enough is enough.

Protect the interests of, and stop taking aim at, the city of Tucson and the people who rely on local government to provide essential services that enhance the quality of life and that make it possible to attract jobs to the community.

Contact your lawmakers

Southern Arizona Sen. Frank Antenori is a sponsor of all three bills mentioned in this guest opinion. His Republican Southern Arizona colleagues Reps. David Gowan and David Stevens also are sponsors of SB 1347. Write to them at fantenori@azleg.gov, dgowan@azleg.gov and dstevens@azleg.gov or call 1-800-352-8404 .

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