

**By Philip S. Moore, Inside Tucson Business**

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In two weeks, when Joseph Snell officially takes over as the first permanent executive director of Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities (TREO), local leaders will be looking to him to set the pace and direction of economic development in Southern Arizona.

And Snell will be looking for a chance to get it done right after being involved in similar efforts in the Denver area that failed to bring sustained business growth. As executive director of the Metro Denver Network from 1999 until 2002, he witnessed first-hand the growth and collapse of that city's high-tech business boom.

Snell, 41, was selected by the TREO Board of Directors from a list of 94 applicants for the position.

Over the last 20 years, Snell has led various economic development agencies. Most recently he was president of the consulting firm Colorado Corporate Affairs. In Tucson, he replaces interim director Steve Lynn as head of the six-month-old TREO, which was created by combining both Tucson and Pima County economic development efforts with the Greater Tucson Economic Council.

Now, Snell said, he is ready to address the issues that Denver ignored, to create a more enduring business-friendly climate for metropolitan Tucson and the companies that support its economy.

"It's not a particular strategy I'd like to see implemented, so much as it is a commitment to making sure the community is competitive," he said in an interview. "I think Tucson can only be successful if it is retaining its best talent and developing its local business. That means establishing a balanced approach to making the community attractive on all fronts."

Until March 1, 2002 that was the message Snell was giving to community leaders in Denver as chief of the consortium of the area's economic development organizations coordinated by the Metro Denver Chamber of Commerce. In the three years he led the Metro Denver Network, he helped develop that city's "Convergence Corridor" campaign and marketed Denver as the nation's top economy for the 21st century.

He was there when that region's economy collapsed, as the high-technology companies that fueled the new economy retrenched or closed their doors. Speaking to a Rocky Mountain News reporter the day before he resigned, Snell said too much success made Denver's leaders overconfident in their ability to attract and sustain high tech business, even as the city lost its competitive advantages in transportation, cost of living and workforce development.

The key to Denver's boom in the 1990s was the in-migration of a highly skilled workforce seeking a better standard of living, he said. As housing costs soared and roads became congested, the in-flow of new business became a trickle, and the stage was set for the collapse.

He told the Denver newspaper "I'm selling this place all the time, and there's not the competitive advantage there was. I could go out to Silicon Valley and Austin and say, 'You need to expand your business here because we're a good place to do business.' We've lost that."

As with Colorado, Snell said Tucson's economy is built on its workforce. But, unlike Denver, Snell said he believes there is the support here to guarantee that this advantage isn't lost.

"From my standpoint, when it comes to big projects like economic development strategies, if everybody can get on the same page there's nothing that a community can't tackle," he said. "So, I was blown away by my visit to Tucson. I fell in love with the place and loved the people I met. They seemed to already appreciate that if we all agree on what the community will look like in 20 years, we'll all get behind it."

Lynn, whose full-time job is as vice president of communications and government relations for Tucson Electric Power, said TREO "is in a terrific position to do economic development the right way in Tucson."

He said TREO's board of directors including representatives from Tucson, Pima County, the University of Arizona and Pima Association of Governments isn't looking to Snell to transform Tucson into a major economic center in the same vein as, say Phoenix or Denver. Instead, Lynn said TREO wants to develop a strategy for competing with other medium-size cities and the companies those cities would attract.

"Tucson doesn't have to be Phoenix to succeed," Lynn said. "That's not where we want to go."

Lynn said Snell's vision is comparable to the partnership of public, private and educational organizations TREO is seeking.

"We want to get all sectors of the community together, all in one place," he said. "The biggest thing that this organization brings to the table is the creation of one plan and one set of metrics for accountability. Most successful communities do it that way, and so should we."

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