Tim Steller's opinion: Big annexations an unrealistic solution for Tucson

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Tim Steller
Annexation naturally tempts Tucson politicians.

If you bring more residents and businesses into the city, the thinking goes, you bring in more state-shared revenue and sales tax. It looks like a path out of the city’s problems.

All the candidates for mayor are treating it that way to some extent, calling for more annexation or incorporation in the Tucson metro area.

One of them is making it a special priority: Former state legislator Steve Farley has repeatedly argued his background would allow him to successfully accelerate annexations of unincorporated Pima County, maybe the Catalina Foothills, which would help solve other problems.

“I think annexation is something we should be exploring once again,” he said to an audience at the Tucson Association of Realtors’ office during a June forum.

“That’s one of the things I would be able to bring to the position as mayor. Because I have been elected three times by people of the unincorporated county to represent them in the Senate, there would be a certain amount of trust to voluntarily annex themselves into the city of Tucson.”

To which I say, “Yeah, maybe.”

Maybe that trust would be useful in convincing county residents of his old Legislative District 9, which covers much of the Foothills, to join the city. And maybe it would be key to solving the city’s problems. But maybe not.

Actually, probably not.
While former Mayor Lew Murphy’s dream of mountain-to-mountain annexation has disappeared, the city government has for years been putting some emphasis on annexing moderately sized areas that touch the city limits.

The city annexed 10 separate areas in 2016 through 2018 that together add up to about 2,800 acres.

The most remarkable one in that time was about 652 acres of largely residential area near South Swan Road and West Valencia Road.

It was remarkable because the city gathered 697 signatures of property owners choosing to join Tucson — most of the other annexations have been either of smaller commercial areas or areas near the airport.

My colleague Gabriela Rico wrote about a controversial example of this type over the weekend — a developer who wants property annexed into the city north of the intersection of East River Road and North Campbell Avenue to build a hotel and town houses on what is now undeveloped desert.

Annexation allows the business to go to the city for a new zoning, and it’s easy for the city to get the few signatures needed. The neighbors who oppose the development have a voice, but since they’re not being annexed, their approval isn’t required.

The city has picked off a series of annexations along East River Road at busy commercial junctions: Craycroft Road, First Avenue, Campbell.

It’s tempting to imagine a long-discussed grand bargain coming to fruition.

The way this bargain is usually talked about around Tucson, residents of the Catalina Foothills would agree to be annexed into the city in exchange for getting ward-only general elections and their own ward and member of the City Council.

The terms of the deal seem vaguely feasible, but the technicalities make it nearly impossible.

The Foothills residents would have to agree to be annexed into the city before the city could offer them a new ward. And no one could promise that they would get their own ward or ward-only general elections in return. City voters would have to vote to approve these things afterward.

Even completing the first step, annexation, would be hard, as city spokesman Andy Squire explained to me. A large portion of Foothills homes are second homes belonging to people who don’t live here, he noted.
“You’ve got to track those people down. Most of those people could care less about our politics or government.”

Mayor Jonathan Rothschild noted in an interview that once the city starts the annexation process, it has just one year to get the required signatures, which makes it harder yet.

In addition, providing services there could be tough. The water pressure and hydrant availability in some of the Foothills is inadequate for the city’s Fire Department to easily move in and take over without significant new investment.

While Farley has positioned himself to be the candidate of big annexations, fellow Democratic contenders Randi Dorman and Regina Romero have staked out a more moderate position that might not involve much annexation at all.

If residents of unincorporated areas choose to incorporate, that also allows the metro area to bring in a bigger portion of state-shared tax revenue than we currently get.

“I believe that we should be aggressive in trying to annex as much as we possibly can in the city of Tucson,” Romero said. “I voted for each and every one of the annexations the past 12 years. If there are communities that do not want to annex into Tucson for whatever crazy reason that is, I feel they should incorporate.”

“If an area like the Foothills does not want to be annexed, they should incorporate.”

Dorman said much the same: “We have had an annexation program, and I think we need to ramp it up. I’m open to incorporation because the goal is to ensure we keep our state-shared revenue.”

When I talked to Councilman Steve Kozachik about annexation Tuesday, one word jumped out: incremental. That’s the pace of change we can expect from annexation.

As Kozachik said, “People who say annexation is the goal and is going to solve everything, I think they’re wrong.”

“It’s incremental dollars.”

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Tim Steller is the Star’s metro columnist. A 20-plus year veteran of reporting and editing, he
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