

Team Offers Blueprint for Economic Self-Help



By Lorraine B. Kingdon

NO DOUBT ABOUT IT — THE ECONOMY AFFECTS EVERYONE, particularly in a small community. But what about the reverse? Can people really do anything to change their lives?

“The influence of the economy on small communities is significant, but the influence of people on the economy is profound,” says Nancy Huber, the former director of the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Community Leadership and Resource Development (CLRD) program. She believes in looking at economic development in a different way than the traditional GNP.

“Money isn’t the bottom line,” she says. “The real bottom line is the way people live, hope and work. Treating the economy otherwise is the same as a doctor stitching the skin over a broken bone without first fixing the bone.”

This approach may not be traditional, but it works. Huber and Charles (Corky) Poster, who worked together prior to her recent retirement, have proved that “bottom up” development can change towns. Poster, an architect and planner, continues to head an innovative economic-stimulus program developed under CLRD auspices.

Their proof is easy to see in communities like South Tucson, the South Park Neighborhood, just east of South Tucson, and Tubac. Success stories have spread, and Poster is now working with the Southeastern Arizona communities of

Douglas, Duncan and Nogales, as well as Payson and the privately owned Babocomari Ranch between Sonoita and Sierra Vista.

CLRD set out to provide planning and development services to small communities unable to pay the big fees charged by private consultants. South Tucson was the first community to come to Poster about two years ago.

“In the fall of 1990, Bill Ponder, the city manager, came to the dean of the College of Architecture,” recalls Poster, an Extension specialist with CLRD and a faculty member at the UA Drachman Institute for Land and Regional Development Studies. “Ponder was looking at improving the arterial roads in South Tucson and needed some community design help.”

And, that’s what they got. Poster and five senior architectural students in planning and landscape architecture worked for free, first taking an inventory of South Fourth and Sixth avenues and 29th Street. Together, in only one semester, they wrote two design proposal booklets and prepared a videotape for a “South Sixth Avenue Corridor Revitalization Project.”

As a result of “doing their homework,” as Poster puts it, the South Tucson city government so impressed the Economic Development Administration in Washington, D.C. that the town was granted a \$1.4 million appropriation for improvements. The city took the same plans to the Arizona Depart-



South Tucson landed state and federal economic-development grants to renovate its main street, South Sixth Avenue, based on plans developed at the University of Arizona. In nearby South Park, a depressed Tucson neighborhood, similar UA plans have led to numerous community improvement projects, including a demonstration low-cost solar home. Michael Stoklos photos

ment of Transportation and received \$2.8 million to face-lift South Sixth Avenue as it is transferred from state to city jurisdiction (it is part of old U.S. Highway 89.)

But where did the people of South Tucson come into the process? Poster and his team met three times with local residents, giving opponents and proponents of the ambitious proposals a chance to work out potential snags.

Reporter J.C. Martin wrote in *The Arizona Daily Star*, "...eventually all 14 blocks of South Tucson's main street will be spruced up...Power lines will go underground; the street will be widened by 2 feet on each side; sidewalks of colored interlocking concrete blocks will appear along with 200 trees and their own watering system; and bus stops will sprout."

The goal of the project is to raise property values along the avenue and to attract business. Poster says the \$4.2 million in state and federal funding can be parlayed into a catalyst for further improvements in the city's infrastructure.

"It's a nice model that immediately attracted more attention [from other distressed communities]," he says, smiling.

The next to ask for help was Tucson Urban League, which appealed for help for the South Park Neighborhood, an inner city community south and east of downtown Tucson. Historically, the South Park area is a community under stress.

Eighty-five percent of the people are minority, mostly African-American, and they suffer from low incomes, poor housing, low educational levels and high unemployment.

The neighborhood has been studied before. In 1970, and again in 1984, formal land use plans were drawn up, partly as a result of predicted changes caused by two new transportation corridors (Kino Boulevard and Aviation Parkway) that would surround the neighborhood. The plans didn't work out, however, because the market for the kinds of uses envisioned virtually disappeared in the 1980s.

This time, the Urban League appealed for help. Although land use planning is perhaps less critical than originally believed, the need for socially oriented planning addressing housing, community development and services has dramatically increased.

Poster studied both land development and community needs. The first step was to go to the people to find out their concerns. They were many, including drug and substance abuse; safety and security; health care; child care; social services; recreation; education and training for employment; economic development; transportation; improved housing and appropriate land use.

"We got all the people who were interested in the same room to discuss the problems," Poster says. "We left knowing



University of Arizona architect Charles Poster leads efforts to provide free planning services to communities in need of finding a “sparkplug” for economic development. *Ken Matesich photo*

we had to find a multi-faceted approach to set community-wide goals and suggest ways to implement solutions. And, we looked for accidental opportunities we could take advantage of.”

The Behco Kino gateway site was one such “accident.” In 1984, foreign-owned Behco Corporation had the 120-acre site between 29th and 36th streets zoned Park-Industrial for a proposed hotel complex. Behco went bankrupt and the property was repossessed by Pima Savings and Loan, which shortly thereafter also went bankrupt and was taken over by the Resolution Trust Corporation.

The upshot of this complicated scenario was that the zoning either had to be extended or it would lapse. Poster argued before the Tucson City Council to allow a zoning lapse so the community could decide what to do with the land. For the first time in recent history, the Council agreed.

The opportunity? The site would be ideal for a two- or four-year college — which would answer several of the South Park residents’ concerns.

Other results of the inch-thick planning document and the

videotape Poster prepared for South Park are beginning to appear. The Tucson Parks and Recreation Department made improvements slated for the Quincie-Douglas Neighborhood Center, 1100 E. Silverlake Rd., a top priority in its bond issue. A \$100,000 grant from the Tucson Community Association will be used to help families stay together. Neighborhood people are developing a credit union and the Arizona Energy Office is funding a demonstration, low-cost solar home.

“The community is using the plan as their bible, a guide for decision-making and for finding additional funds,” Poster says. “This plan gave them a huge amount of credibility; they’ve done their homework to get available resources from all sorts of agencies and foundations.”

The South Park Neighborhood won a state planning award in 1992. They — and Poster — are very proud of the honor, especially since the plan was developed on a shoestring budget and won over proposals submitted by cities like Tucson and Phoenix. All South Park needed was a catalyst to show them how to use their own resources, Poster comments.

Planning for the historic artisan village of Tubac, south of Tucson, seems a very different challenge from those found in South Tucson and South Park. Yet, the process was similar. After being invited by the Santa Cruz County Planning and Zoning Department, Poster and his students drew up an array of concepts for enhancing the public spaces in Tubac, which depends heavily on tourist traffic.

“We described all the possibilities and let the community tell us which they like best. We put up lots of drawings and let people walk through them,” Poster says. All the village streets, the banks of the Santa Cruz River, the central plaza, the state park area, and even the locations of public restrooms became part of the plans. Tubac has since voted for bond funding and has hired a landscape architect to carry out the resident-approved plans.

The verdict on previous projects appears conclusive, and these days Poster has all the projects he can handle.

Duncan wants a community trail put together between the high school and the old park.

Payson wants a revitalized Main Street.

Safford wants its rodeo grounds to become the best in the state.

Owners of the spectacular Babocomari Ranch want a landscape design to help them open a riparian area to the public.

Is there a downside to the picture? Poster says he has sometimes been criticized for taking work away from private architects and planners. Actually, he says, he does just the opposite — he creates work. He and his students only prepare a master plan as dictated by the various communities. The final construction and all the detailed documents required are left to private industry.

“We’re developing work for private firms, not taking it away,” Poster says.