

VALLEY VOICES

Where we are now: Base closure aftermath

By Joseph W. Brady and Holly Noel

Editor's note: This is the second in a series of three op-ed pieces on the Victor Valley. Next Sunday's final article will examine where we go from here.

At the end of 1992, everything changed. George AFB closed and a large dark cloud fell over our desert.

Fifty years earlier, civic leaders had worked together to create what would become George Air Force Base. In 1992, local leaders had a very different reaction upon the closure of George AFB. The formation of a regional Joint Powers Authority gave hope for a plan for this priceless asset. Even with a "fast track" federal plan for environmental clean-up, local officials could not agree on a re-use for the property.

Friendships were lost as community leaders were pitted against one another. About \$16 million was spent in the biggest political battle our region had ever seen. Eventually leaders from Adelanto and Victorville got together and agreed to end the squabbling. We believe the effects of this fiasco, however, are still being felt in our economy today, almost 25 years later. The economies of other areas that suffered a base closure have recovered and even thrive. Austin, Texas, community leaders came together immediately after the closure of Bergstrom AFB and floated a bond to create a new international airport. The bond was approved by 63 percent of the voters. Today, it is the 34th busiest airport in the country. Obviously, the leaders as well as the public came together for that success.

Efforts to get our elected officials to come together in support of a collective vision have failed over the years. Often the plans fail at the agency or leadership level; sometimes they are defeated by the public.

Two local leaders once floated the idea of combining Adelanto, Victorville, Hesperia and Apple Valley (prior to incorporation) into one community. Other community leaders practically ran them out of town.

If they had succeeded, our combined municipality would now be about the size of Oakland. Our valley would speak as one voice and we can only imagine our accomplishments.

Community leaders were not willing then to work together to create a large municipality, but occasionally they do come together. Many of our local leaders were behind the drive to have the High Desert become "Mojave County," removing itself from San Bernardino County in an effort to see political power returned to local control. While it ultimately failed, at least a host of leaders were willing to try. Just like a few worked to successfully incorporate Apple Valley. While collective efforts of political leaders often fail, uncooperative efforts rarely succeed. As hockey legend Wayne Gretzky said, "You miss 100 percent of the shots you don't take."

We often wonder how our valley economy survived from the mid-1990s until about 2007. While many in the private sector were encouraging a collaborative effort to create a regional economic development group, many local government officials thought otherwise and so multiple efforts at collaboration died. We believe that only the strength of the national economy pulled us through. The economic downturn of 2008, however, left an indelible mark on our valley.

Today, our High Desert population has an unemployment rate of 10-15 percent. The recent murder of two longtime Apple Valley residents is just one indication that our crime rates have risen. We have one of the highest rates of opiate use in the country and 52 percent of our population is on some type of government assistance. Our high school graduation rates are below average, as is our median income and we still don't have a four-year college in our area.

And yet, the Special Report headline in this paper doesn't tell of efforts by local officials to solve these problems, the problems that we, the public, elected them to address. Instead we learn that the agenda of some local officials involves back room politicking, perceived threats, personal attacks and game playing.

The fervor of national politics right now shows that the public is sick and tired of the people that they elect spending time on petty matters or personal agendas instead of getting the job done. While we find several reasons to be concerned about our national politics, there are a multitude of reasons to be truly worried about our local politics. As composer Stephen Sondheim said, "Tragedy tomorrow, comedy tonight." But we are not laughing. Neither should you.