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# Arizona Daily Star

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## Local opinion: Republican state budget puts Southern Arizona last

Kevin Volk

*Special to the Arizona Daily Star*

*The following is the opinion and analysis of the writer:*

Last week, more than 100 days after Governor Hobbs presented the executive budget proposal, Arizona Republican legislative leadership finally unveiled their budget response.

This is a tough year. Local economists point to a whole host of decisions by the federal government — tariffs, the war in Iran, federal cuts, and overall unpredictability — that are spiking prices, making consumers less confident, and slowing our economy, all of which leads to less revenue for our state.

There will have to be cuts. But this budget proposal — which every single Republican state representative voted to approve — would force Southern Arizona to take a disproportionate brunt of the pain.

We're used to legislators in Phoenix prioritizing their region when it comes to funding and support. Advocating for our fair share for Southern Arizona, as well as for rural and tribal communities, will always be a battle as long as this majority is in power. However, this budget takes neglecting the Tucson area to a whole other level.

As someone born and raised here — from being a U of A basketball-obsessed kid, to being a small business owner today — the targeting of our community by this budget proposal is unacceptable. I will fight for a budget that is fair to our region — not one where it seems like we're taking all the hits.

Among many cuts that would impact our area, Republicans have singled out two uniquely Tucsonan institutions for the deepest cuts: the University of Arizona, the heartbeat of our community, and Rio Nuevo, a now-proven business model for economic development.



To be sure, all of higher education is in the crosshairs — this budget contains about \$69 million of total cuts from ASU, NAU, and U of A in the first year alone. But what’s shocking is that approximately \$44 million — about 64% of those cuts — target the University of Arizona.

General funds for the university and the medical campus to pay staff, invest in programming, and prevent tuition increases? Cut by about \$14 million.

Targeted funds totaling about \$30 million are also wiped out. That includes research for priorities like agriculture, space and national security, AI and health innovation, fusion energy, mining and critical minerals, and already-committed funds to complete the U of A Medical Innovations Building.

Over the past few years, the University of Arizona has worked hard to solve a massive financial deficit and keep tuition flat. But if the state slashes support, expect tuition to jump — meaning higher costs for students and their families.

This budget also takes a sledgehammer to one of Tucson’s most successful tools to create businesses and jobs. Since its restart from the troubled early days, Rio Nuevo has been an entity that has catalyzed the growth and development of downtown Tucson and Broadway corridor businesses, even in the face of immense challenges, from the snail-like pace of the road widening project to COVID.

Its board represents some of the most experienced members of the business community in our region, who were selected on a bipartisan basis. Their leadership — including the late Chris Sheafe, who gave 15 years of dedicated service — has delivered, generating tens of millions of dollars of new tax revenue that they reinvest right here in our community.

The cuts proposed in this budget — unanimously supported by House Republicans — would stop Rio Nuevo dead in its tracks. That’s not only bad for our local economy, but would actually prevent us from making needed future bond payments. I’m disappointed that my colleagues voted against business creation, against job growth, and in favor of a policy that would have us bail on our financial obligations.

The federal administration’s decisions have led us to a tough economic picture. It’s the Legislature’s job to lessen the impact for us in the Tucson area — not make it worse.

It’s not over yet. I have spoken against and voted against this proposal repeatedly, and will continue to work to get to a balanced budget that doesn’t sacrifice the interests of Southern Arizona. The last budget vote might have been partisan, but this shouldn't be about party — it should be about coming together for our region.

*Kevin Volk is a small-business owner and former 5th-grade teacher, currently serving as Arizona State Representative for Legislative District 17 (Tucson, Marana, Oro Valley, SaddleBrooke, Vail).*