

Shoshone County voters wise to reject creation of urban renewal district

By Wayne Hoffman, Idaho Freedom Foundation

Shoshone County taxpayers reached a notable conclusion in the May 21 election: More government won't mean more economic opportunity and prosperity. I suspect that advocates of urban renewal will try again.

I'm more hopeful that advocates of urban renewal in other parts of the state, including those in Nampa, will take note: If your project is so wonderful, you ought to have no trouble presenting it to voters.

Voters in Shoshone County rejected the creation of a new urban renewal agency by a 3-1 margin. The electorate simply didn't buy the sales pitch about the urban renewal agency and its related promise of "jobs, jobs, jobs." Here some notions from what voters told us:

1. The county commissioners probably meant well when they promised that urban renewal would be used for the rehab of a rural road leading to mining country. But, then again, once the agency was created, there was nothing stopping commissioners from using urban renewal in other ways.
2. The commissioners promised that the urban renewal agency would cease operations in 10 years. But other urban renewal agencies have made similar promises throughout the state. Government always finds more work to do, no matter what. That rendered the commissioners' promise invalid.
3. It didn't seem right that the county was summarily deciding that the county's economic future rested in mining. Perhaps some other industry would usher in the county's economic revival. Government tends to think it knows the answer, but then gets it wrong.
4. The promise that urban renewal would mean investment in public infrastructure at no cost to taxpayers didn't sound plausible. Voters rightfully understood that there was an associated expense, and taxpayers always pay the tab.
5. Shoshone County is not urban. And the road project targeted by elected officials is rural, remote and anything but in need of urban sprucing. The shoe just didn't fit, and voters felt there was a disconnect between what the county was selling and what the populous was expected to buy.

In 2011, the Legislature required plans to create urban renewal agencies to go before voters. But this requirement does not extend to places where urban renewal agencies are already in place. As such, the May 21 vote was the first instance of which I'm aware that such a proposal was put on the ballot.

Meanwhile, because existing urban renewal programs don't need voter approval, clever government officials are finding new and interesting ways to use urban renewal, including in Nampa, where a new district is to benefit one developer in one block of the city.

Like Shoshone County, Nampa officials are promising jobs, jobs, jobs at zero cost to taxpayers. Interesting, if true.

If Nampa's plan is so wonderful, with such tremendous benefits and no downsides, Nampa officials should be willing to take their plan to voters, too. They won't because the law doesn't require it.

They will also note the cost of an election, even though city voters just cast ballots this month and will again in November.

But they also won't because it is possible the discerning Nampa voter might, just might, start to ask questions. And they might reach the same conclusion that Shoshone County voters reached. And elected officials simply wouldn't want to risk that happening.

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