

## Arena Money Best Spent On The Poor

July 2006

**Note** - For purposes of this essay, I make a distinction between the poor, which I define as the working, minimum-wage members of our community, and the homeless, which I define as the people in our community who are so marginalized, isolated and broken down, they will never work another day in their lives. In fact, the members of this latter group, have been certified by the federal government as unemployable, and are no longer counted in the nation's unemployment statistics. Rather, they are given a monthly disability stipend, or are theoretically eligible to qualify for such a stipend, which amounts to an average of about \$25/day with which to eke out an existence on the streets of Sacramento.

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YES, how many times have I heard this anti-arena-type argument: public tax money which is used to subsidize private business could be better spent on the poor – and, if one wishes to make even a stronger emotional argument, instead of the word poor, substitute the words: the homeless in our community.

A noble thought, really, but it is based on a false premise. Local government will never tax its citizens to tend to the needs of the poor, or the homeless in our community. The only funds local government will appropriate for homeless services – and this only because of the constant nagging pressure from do-gooders – is the money that has already been allocated by congress for these purposes.

The reality is that local government does not admit that homeless people exist, or if they do exist, it is only because they have made poor choices, and they could remedy their situation if only they made better choices. My friend and former colleague, Mayor Joe Serna, once stated in public session that the policy of the city of Sacramento was not to recognize, accept - or God forbid, ever condone – that anyone in the city was homeless.

So, if citizens vote against the tax increase to build the arena, this will not result in any funds being made available to provide additional emergency survival services to assist either the poor or the homeless in our community – the only result will be the status quo.

However, it is possible that if the tax increase were passed to build the arena, the poor and the homeless of our community might directly benefit. I say possible and might, because local government would have to create two conditions:

1. All arena employees – full time or part-time – would be paid a living wage, which would include health benefits. I daresay that most arena jobs are minimum wage-type jobs. If the owners of the arena were required to pay a living wage to ALL employees and sub-contractors associated with the public tax-subsidized arena, what a difference this would make in the everyday lives of the working poor in our community - at least for the next thirty years.
2. A certain percentage of the gross revenue from all events staged in the new public tax-subsidized arena would be used to provide additional emergency survival services for the homeless in our community – especially food and shelter.

If local government were to adopt these two arena conditions, the critics who use the poor and the homeless as a rationale for their opposition would be silenced AND the thousands of supporters of groups like Loaves & Fishes - the county-wide base of financial support for Loaves & Fishes exceeds 20,000 households – would view their upcoming vote on the arena in an entirely different light.

Do you expect such an enlightened view from local government? Of course not!