EDITORIAL THE REPUBLIC EDITORIAL BOARD - Arizona Republic

Keep the State's Skies Dark

Using light wisely will help preserve science-based jobs

If the stars disappeared, would we miss them? If it happened gradually, would we notice?

These are important questions because Arizona's starry nights are disappearing, light bulb by light bulb. The Valley is to blame, and you can do something to stop it.

Aside from the spiritual, philosophical and aesthetic values that songwriters and poets celebrate, dark nights and sparkling skies are important to Arizona for dollars and cents reasons.

Arizona's astronomy, space and planetary sciences endeavors bring in $252.8 million a year, attracting about 200,800 visitors and employing about 3,300 people directly and indirectly, according to a 2008 study by the University of Arizona.

Reporting by The Republic's Megan Finnerty found that Arizona is among only three areas in the country that will have the potential for high-quality astronomy and nocturnal wilderness research 10 years from now.

They are southeastern Oregon and western Idaho; northeastern Nevada and western Utah; and northern Arizona and southeastern Utah.

As light pollution spreads across the rest of the nation, these areas have the potential to become hotspots for scientific research. But only if planning is done now to mitigate the impact of population growth on the night skies.

Currently, the glow from city lights in the Valley spreads more than 200 miles in all directions. That encompasses most of Arizona, including Flagstaff 's Lowell Observatory, Kitt Peak Observatory southwest of Tucson and the Mount Graham

International Observatory. Without dark, clear skies, the value of these observatories is compromised.|

Cities close to the resources get it. Tucson implemented lighting codes decades ago to protect the dark skies, and that city hasn't gotten any brighter in the past 30 years, despite a big population increase. Flagstaff and Sedona are on the International Dark-Sky Association's list of Dark Sky Communities for their efforts. Other cities have also stepped up.

This complex issue deserves focused attention that goes beyond the obvious. For example, asphalt is more reflective than grass or dirt, so lighting codes also need to look at ground glare, too.

What's needed is an aggressive and coordinated effort. An attempt by the Maricopa Association of Governments to limit lighting throughout the region was derailed several years ago based on concerns that have proven unfounded in other places. It's time to take another look.|

Individual Arizonans can animate local and statewide efforts by creating grassroots energy for recognizing the value of dark skies. They can also take a look around their homes and neighborhoods to make sure lighting is necessary and designed to preserve the dark skies.

What you do in your backyard and how businesses illuminate signs and parking lots makes a difference. Using light wisely can help assure Arizona remains among the areas of the country where dark skies have economic value for scientific research.

Not to mention the more nebulous value of starlight to lovers and other poets.