

Report outlines needs for SE Valley, Pinal growth

by *Lynh Bui and Kerry Fehr-Snyder* - May. 1, 2008 12:00 AM

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The Southeast Valley and Pinal County are on the verge of becoming either a giant cul-de-sac or part of a thriving megalopolis incorporating Phoenix and Tucson, a consultant's study will show Thursday.

The East Valley Partnership-sponsored report says the region needs to build four new freeways, push for a new stand-alone college or university and encourage more hospitals if it is to enter a mature and sustainable adulthood after years of explosive, sprawling growth.

The report, conducted by nationally renowned planner John Fregonese, will be unveiled at an East Valley Partnership business and government luncheon at the Arizona Grand Resort. Of the roughly 7.5 million people expected to pour into metro Phoenix by 2060, one-third of those residents are likely to call Pinal County and the southeast Valley home.

One million of those could live on the 275 square miles of Superstition Vistas, a swath of state land sandwiched between Queen Creek, Florence, Apache Junction and the Superstition Mountains.

The Vistas is an area larger than Gilbert, Mesa, Tempe and Chandler combined.

The expanse of undeveloped desert is a prime chance to stray from Arizona's typical model of bedroom-community sprawl, proponents say. Roads, employment centers, trails and other infrastructure all could be

laid out by a Superstition Vistas committee, which would include state, Pinal County and East Valley Partnership representatives.

Once that planning is done, the land would be sold to developers.

It also would be divided into political subdivisions. Although there is no guarantee that those entities will follow the plans laid out for the area, Vistas backers say such advance work can prevent cities playing catch-up with growth, as has been the case throughout the Valley.

"We want to understand how we do good planning so we reserve the right-of-way for roads and know where to put amenities and hook up trails so you don't have to go back over and destroy and rebuild," said Pinal County Supervisor Sandie Smith. "We're looking for something that's not more of the same."

And more of the same right now is pretty grim. About half of the county's workers drive to the western edge of Pinal County or to neighboring Pima or Maricopa counties to work. There are about 260 jobs for every

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1,000 residents in Pinal, compared with 585 in Maricopa County.

Commuters along Hunt Highway, the major road out of Pinal County, surpass the one-hour mark during rush hour.

"When you take a look at the catalysts in the East Valley, the potential is exciting but the work that needs to be done is staggering," said Roc Arnett, East Valley Partnership president and chief executive officer.

Arnett said the study's findings are part of the business and political group's ongoing discussion about the region's future, promise and potential peril.

"It's up to the body politic," Arnett said. "Do we leave things as the status quo or do we move ahead?"

Arnett warned that traffic patterns are one of the area's biggest challenges.

"If we just put traffic in and out, it (the region) just becomes a cul-de-sac," he said.

But of the four freeways planned between now and then to alleviate traffic bottlenecks, none is yet funded by the Maricopa Association of Governments, the region's planning group.

Arizona Department of Transportation Director Victor Mendez recently said his agency will run out of money to build freeways by 2015 and that only money to maintain existing roads will be available.

Handling road construction and other issues will determine whether the southeast Valley and Pinal County become a model for smart growth or one of the country's fastest-growing region chokes to death from

poor planning.

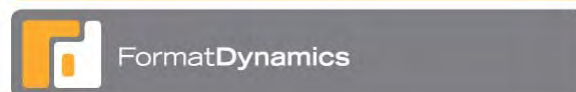
With rising gas prices and heightened talk of global warming, the pressure is on to build more self-contained communities rather than relying on commutes to Phoenix and Tucson for employment, entertainment and education.

Fregonese, the planner, determined that northern Pinal County and the southeast Valley could grow into an environmentally friendly region with strong employment centers, diverse housing, quality schools and recreation access.

Fregonese knows the importance of good planning. He has worked on several regional planning projects across the country, including Portland's Metro 2040 Growth Concept, a model that cities and towns all over the U.S. use when trying to craft balanced communities with measured growth.

"Places that have looked ahead have been the ones that have been successful," Fregonese said, adding that Chicago is about to celebrate its 100th anniversary of its

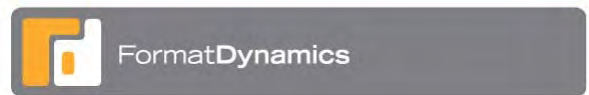
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