

No funding fairy to wave wand to fund Ariz. infrastructure

by [Kathleen Ingley](#) - Nov. 30, 2008 12:00 AM
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Arizona lends itself to myths and legends. The landscape is strange enough, with multiarmed saguaros and otherworldly rock formations. The place names, from the Superstition Mountains to Bagdad, evoke fantasy. The capital is named for a mythical bird - a suggestion from an Englishman who passed himself off as a lord.

But myths can get in the way of dealing with Arizona's challenges as a growing state with enormous needs for services. There's a pervasive fairyland belief that we can have a top-notch state at cut-rate prices.

Two conferences this month brought together policymakers to look at the issue from different angles: "Arizona 2030: Preparing for an Arizona of 10 Million People" and "The Sun Corridor as Mountain 'Mega.' "

One point was clear: We need to bust some cherished myths and face reality.

1st myth busted

There is no freeway fairy. A Scottsdale activist identified the freeway fairy years ago

- the happy belief that pavement will be laid without actually costing us any money. A corollary is the wishful notion that maintenance will take care of itself.

For statewide highway projects, we depend on a gasoline tax, 18 cents a gallon, that hasn't been changed since 1991. It would have to be more than 28 cents to have the same buying power now. Not surprisingly, within seven years, the state will run out of money to do anything but maintenance outside Maricopa and Pima counties (where voters had the foresight to approve half-cent sales taxes for local transportation).

Public-private partnerships could tackle some projects. But that would require tolls, a dirty word to a lot of Arizonans. With technology, we could charge people based on miles driven - but that brings howls of protest, too.

2nd myth busted

Arizona isn't the Lone Ranger. Forget the fed-bashing rhetoric. Arizona, as we know it, wouldn't exist without the dams, canals and other projects financed with federal dollars. Although the recession may slow the increase in population, projected to top 10 million by 2032, the state will still add plenty of people to today's 6.2 million. And our infrastructure already lags the pace of growth.

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Congress will make major spending decisions in the next year or two: an economic stimulus package, a new transportation package and, possibly, support for alternative energy. The Brookings Institution makes a strong case that the intermountain West, with its relatively recent spurt of growth, has gotten shortchanged in federal funding.

Arizona should join with surrounding states to make sure the region gets an equitable share.

Arizona itself must be ready to make a compelling case for our obvious and basic needs, including an interstate connection between Phoenix and Las Vegas.

Other places are poised to outcompete us. "You blink, and Houston will ask for a fifth beltway," warns Robert Lang, director of the Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech.

Myth 3 busted

We can't be Mr. Magoo. Arizona faces huge budget shortfalls. Like the nearsighted cartoon character, it's hard to look beyond the crisis staring us in the face. But farsighted planning isn't any easier in the frenzy of growth.

We've seen how projects like Johnson Ranch and Anthem snarled traffic and failed to

match jobs with housing. We know the doubts about whether there is enough water to support development in the Verde and Chino valleys - and whether Maricopa County's own water supply would be cut. And now is the time to draw lessons from the city of Maricopa, so overbuilt, with so many foreclosures, that it has become the poster child for the housing bubble.

Myth 4 busted

We don't have a map to the Lost Dutchman's Gold Mine. Although we could sure use one. The Arizona Investment Council calculated that over the next 25 years, the state will face a \$288 billion gap between state and local government revenues and spending needs in education, public-health, public-safety, transportation, water and other services. With that kind of potential bill, we should take a close look at what we're buying. What's the most efficient way of supplying services? Can we accomplish other goals, such as cleaner and more reliable energy, at the same time? Can we manage growth to minimize the new services it requires - maybe rebuilding old shopping centers as mixed-use developments?

We can also do a better job of making growth pay its own way. Phoenix is weighing increases of nearly 400 percent in some of its impact fees, the charges to home builders

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that help pay for roads, sewers, parks and libraries. But other cities have been more reluctant, and counties have limited ability to impose impact fees.

Myth 5 busted

Arizona doesn't need modern versions of the Gunfight at the O.K. Corral. The legendary shootout, of course, didn't happen in a corral at all but in a nearby vacant lot - and the circumstances are a lot murkier than the traditional story line of good guys defeating bad guys.

We need political leaders who don't see issues as simple black-and-white choices. They must be willing to cross party and ideological lines to find common ground, to put together forward-looking packages like Proposition 400, Maricopa County's extension of its transportation tax. As Mesa Mayor Scott Smith observed, "That pothole isn't Democratic or Republican. . . . The garbage isn't liberal or conservative."

ASU President Michael Crow poses a question for Arizona's future: "Should we invest in an enhanced quality of life together, as a group, or is it everyone for themselves?"

If we set aside the myths, the answer has to be that Arizonans will invest in the future.

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