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Grasp this: 10M from Rim to border

Tucson, as part of vast corridor, faces tall hurdles

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

This is our future:

A line of tile roofs stretches from the Mogollon Rim almost to the U.S.-Mexican border.

Only Indian reservations and other publicly owned land interrupt the seas of homes, apartments and stores — 10 million people living in a "Sun Corridor" belt from Prescott to Sierra Vista by 2040.

Long before that — about 10 years from now — the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas will meet around Picacho Peak, University of Arizona economist Marshall Vest says.

Although Southwest cities have been spreading since World War II, this expected growth will bring twice as much development in the next 35 years as occurred last century.

Pima County's population will reach 1.5 million by 2027 and 2 million by 2051.

In 2040 Arizona will be the fifth-largest state, with 14.6 million people, up from 6.25 million today.

The biggest question facing Tucson for the next 20 years: "Will it be uncontrolled growth that damages the environment and doesn't provide enough health care and roads for our population?" asks Peter Likins, the just-retired UA president. "Then, Tucson will be just another city that grew too fast."

To grow smart, planners say, metro Tucson needs to:

- Deal with more-than-doubled traffic loads.
- Attract more high-tech, high-wage employers.
- Improve public schools so they train a more talented work force.
- Upgrade air service to better compete with Phoenix.
- Find new sources of water and a way to pay for them.
- Come up with the money to build schools, police stations and libraries — possibly through impact fees of \$26,000 or more on new homes.

Mini-doc: The effects of growth

As Tucson's population hits 1 million, Star reporter Tony Davis explores the benefits and costs of growth on the city.

Watch the video

Learn more about Tucson at a million, including stories looking at how we got here and where we're headed, a mini-documentary video examining the effects of growth on the city and more videos and slide shows.

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Historian Jim Turner of the Arizona Historical Society narrates this brief history of the city of Tucson.

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Statewide, "The price tag to manage a sustainable economy and quality of life, with 14 million people, will be staggering," says Barry Broome, president and CEO of Greater Phoenix Leadership.

"We need a real soul-searching in leadership of Arizona."

We'll be using the same roads

For many, traffic congestion will be the most obvious symptom of the new growth.

Traffic will more than double by 2030 on Interstate 10 east and west of Tucson, and on North Oracle Road near the Pima-Pinal County line, regional planners say.

Even with Pima County's new \$2.1 billion Regional Transportation Authority plan in place, the Barraza-Aviation Parkway and many other major stretches of road also will be severely congested by 2030.

That's because the RTA plan falls 19 percent short of the money needed to satisfy traffic demand, not including all the growth expected in Pinal and Cochise counties, a government study says.

"There aren't going to be any new freeways built for a very long time. That means people will have to use existing roads," says Jack Tomasik, planning director for a regional agency serving Pinal County, one of the fastest-growing counties in the United States.

It's pretty easy now for marketing specialist Joe Bidwell to make the 40-mile drive from his home north of Oracle Junction to his job near Downtown. Even on Tucson's densely populated Northwest Side at 7:15 a.m., he cruises at 35 mph and he usually gets to work in an hour.

But over the next 30 years, up to 400,000 homes will be built in southern and central Pinal County, sending droves more commuters to work in the Tucson and Phoenix metro areas.

Eventually, many people living as far north as Eloy and Florence will commute to Pima County to work, Tomasik says.

Service economy or high-tech?

All this growth could be good for our pocketbooks — but that prediction carries a big "if," experts say.

Pima County's million-plus population could bring in more big employers, says C.R. Canup, president of AngelouEconomics, an Austin, Texas-based consulting firm that advises technology companies on where to locate.

But three UA economists — Vest, Marshall Worden and Alberta Charney — say the state needs to be willing to invest more in schools first.

Canup agrees that many employers look at the quality of schools in choosing plant sites.

When a company gets to a short list of five or six communities, "that is when we start looking at the percentage of college grads, high school grads, standardized-test scores, student-teacher ratios and expenditures per pupil," Canup says.

"Seldom is one single factor going to eliminate you, but accumulation of several low scoring factors might."

Historically, Arizona has scored low compared with the rest of the country on key educational indicators: student-teacher ratio, per-pupil state school spending and dropout rates.

Arizona could wind up with a service-based economy dependent on tourists and retirees, or it could have a diversified economy with plenty of high-wage, high-tech jobs, Vest says.

"What will be the determining factor? It will be first and foremost how well we do developing our work force," he adds.

Richard Hubbard, director of Valley Partnership, a Phoenix-based business-advocacy group, says Pima County

offers quality of life and opportunity to attract employers.

"There also has to be a social fabric that makes living in the area attractive to quality employers: entertainment, education, retail opportunities, places where you want to live, work and play," he says.

That could happen, because bigger cities have more money and larger audiences to attract entertainment and shopping venues.

But it could be a challenge for art groups, now based Downtown, to also serve people living in new suburbs 40 miles away, says Jessica Andrews, the Arizona Theater Company's executive director.

"Keeping Downtown the center of Tucson that people think of as a hub would be a very important issue."

Unheard-of impact fees possible

Many suburban school systems will face more overcrowding as they struggle to build schools.

The rural community of Red Rock near Picacho Peak, for instance, could get more than 2,000 new students from the 4,000 homes ultimately planned for Red Rock Village, a development under construction just north of the Pima-Pinal county line. Currently, Red Rock Elementary has 100 students.

Local governments will face such overwhelming demands for roads, police stations and libraries that officials will start charging home builders sharply higher fees.

They could be as high or higher than the \$26,000-a-home impact fees proposed in the Phoenix area, said Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry.

The fees could raise home prices enough to keep some entry-level buyers out of the market.

Airport must play catch-up

Better air service might follow as Pima County continues to grow, says Alex Kovach, Tucson Airport Authority's air-service development director.

"Airlines are particularly sensitive to the amount of business travel a city generates," Kovach says. "If we bring in more new business, particularly those with client-to-client businesses where employees have to go to meetings with clients and make service calls with clients, that should help our air service.

"As we continue to increase our population base, that will help us simply because the demand will go up."

But it will probably be years before Tucson International Airport can start recovering a significant portion of the air traffic it now loses to Phoenix, an industry consultant says.

Today, one of every three or four airline passengers living in the Tucson area flies out of Sky Harbor Airport.

"It is a dynamic that doesn't change very quickly. You are dealing with unfair competition. Not only is Phoenix bigger, but the air service it now has is well beyond what it could support by itself," says Mike Boyd, president of a Colorado-based firm that advises the airline industry. "You have less service in Tucson than what you can support."

Global warming is a wild card

After 2025, Tucson Water says it won't have enough water to meet customer demand because of the continued population growth.

That will force officials to find new, more expensive supplies. Possibilities include desalinated seawater, sewage wastewater treated for drinking, and Colorado River water whose rights are now owned by Indian tribes.

The need for the additional supplies could be more acute if global warming sharply reduces future Colorado River flows. That possibility draws increasing concern among scientists, but there is no consensus on how big a problem it could be.

Hector Soza, whose great-great-great grandfather enlisted in the Spanish presidio at Tubac back in 1770, accepts growth as inevitable.

But he wonders if the water will be there to support it, and he doesn't want to see more desert disappear. Local governments need to preserve our culture and history, he says.

Soza, now 77, was born on the family's ranching homestead in Happy Valley near Redington Pass on the far East Side. He first moved to Tucson in 1936 with his father when Pima County had about 65,000 people.

"If you don't have the water, you're gone," Soza warns.

On StarNet: Meet Tucson's newest residents, the Petersons, who just moved to town yesterday, in an online video at go.azstarnet.com/onemillion

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