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Obstacles unlikely to stop sprawl to Prescott

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Metropolitan Phoenix's onward growth could soon cut a swath down the middle of Arizona.

Phoenix and Tucson connecting is no surprise. But for the first time, planners say the Valley's population could head north through high desert, national forests and mountains to Prescott.

It's not an easy path. There are many roadblocks to growth toward Prescott or even deep into Yavapai County.

- In the far north Valley, much of the land is federal and may never be developed. Other big swaths are state-owned and could take years to plan and sell. The Arizona State Land Department doesn't have the resources to plan and sell its land ahead of the state's fast-moving growth.

- Water resources are limited and could impede the Valley's growth into Yavapai County.

- Then there's transportation. Traffic along Interstate 17, the freeway connecting Phoenix north to Flagstaff, is bumper-to-bumper most days.

A merger between Phoenix and Tucson is the more obvious and easier growth pattern, since the land between the state's two biggest metropolitan areas is flat farmland that is easy to build on.

Still, the Valley is expected to stretch from Prescott, 85 miles north of Phoenix, all the way south to the Mexico border as early as 2040.

The area already has garnered the designation of a megapolitan or "super-sized" metropolitan area. Urban researchers call it the "Arizona Sun Corridor" and rank it as one of the next 10 big U.S. growth hubs. That designation will help it get more growth funding and planning assistance from the federal government.

The metropolitan areas of Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott together have a population of about 5 million, a figure expected to double by 2010.

The Prescott area, which includes the towns Prescott Valley and Chino Valley, is the smallest of the areas but growing rapidly. Prescott's population has climbed from 9,000 in 1990 to about 38,000. Economists predict it could have as many as 80,000 residents by 2025.

"We look down at the Valley with squinty eyes," said Gary Marks, executive director of Prescott Valley's Economic Development Foundation. "We have a lot of natural boundaries to growth. The stretch between Phoenix and Tucson is much easier to develop.

"But never say never, because people didn't think Anthem would ever happen," he said.

Creeping north

Developer Del Webb launched the Valley's growth to the north in the mid-1990s with its Anthem project on the border of New River. Since then, more than 9,000 homes have gone up in the 6,000-acre development, which is more than 35 miles from downtown Phoenix.

Several big developers followed Del Webb when it went north, filling in gaps between Anthem and Loop 101. Big employers such as military insurer USAA followed.

To the west of I-17, Peoria has annexed land into Yavapai County, the first Valley city to do so. Peoria is now bumping up to Lake Pleasant and Bureau of Land Management land.

It's unlikely Peoria or Phoenix will grow farther north for a while because those blocks of BLM land are interlaced with huge parcels of state land around Lake Pleasant and north of New River.

The BLM is revamping its plan for more than 3 million acres of land, most of which lies between the Valley and Prescott. The land includes the Agua Fria National Monument and is home to endangered species such as the bald eagle.

"Planning for conservation, recreation and any development is a balancing act," said Deborah Stevens of the BLM's Arizona land and realty program. "Almost everyone who lives in north Phoenix uses BLM land for recreation."

The federal agency is not likely to auction off any of the parcels between metropolitan Phoenix and Prescott to builders like it did with land outside Las Vegas, because the Valley's growth isn't contingent on the federal land. The BLM owns 80 percent of the open land in Nevada and has recently auctioned off big parcels around Las Vegas.

One option for growth on BLM land in the north Valley could be swaps with the State Land Department.

"The checkerboard land ownership situation in northern Arizona is awful for everybody, particularly when wildcat subdivisions go up on private parcels in between and tax resources even more," said Mark Winkleman, head of the State Land Department.

He said the agency is planning land as far north as Carefree Highway and I-17 but is years away from doing anything farther north.

Running out of water

If available land doesn't slow the Valley's growth toward Prescott, water will.

Phoenix, Tucson and Prescott all must show a housing development has a 100-year supply of water before construction can begin. Yavapai County draws most of its water from the ground, and because of its growth, the area is pumping far more than can be replaced either naturally or artificially.

Wade Cunningham of the Prescott office of the Land Advisors Organization knows the area has growth constraints, but he remains bullish on its future development because it's working on ways to tap water for the area.

One plan calls for the first of eight wells to be dug by July 2009, tapping into the Big Chino aquifer on a ranch 30 miles away. At full capacity, those pumps could take 2.8 billion gallons of water a year from the ground and send them through a pipeline to the Prescott area.

Environmentalists worry the water plan will dry up the Verde River.

An auction for treated wastewater for use in Prescott Valley homes was held a few weeks ago in an effort to stretch the area's water supply. The first water auction of its kind in the country drew a single bidder.

Developers have found other creative ways to get water. Del Webb struck a deal to lease water from the Ak-Chin tribe to get land for its Anthem development near New River.

Freeway logjam

It's not water that's the problem for many residents of developments along I-17 now, it's their commute.

In September, more than 200 Anthem residents showed up at an Arizona Department of Transportation meeting to discuss the widening of I-17.

But many moaned when they heard relief from the area's traffic congestion is years away.

Construction to widen I-17 between Loop 101 and Carefree Highway starts next year. But major work on the freeway north of the Carefree Highway to Anthem isn't planned to start until 2023.

Community leaders in Prescott, Sedona and Flagstaff say traffic problems keep people from traveling to their areas, which depend on tourism.

What used to be a two-hour trip from Phoenix to Flagstaff can now take four hours during peak travel times.

One thing that could help is Loop 303, which will let commuters going to the West Valley exit I-17 several miles before Loop 101. But that construction is five years away.

Where does growth go?

More than 100,000 people are expected to move to the Valley each year for the next several years.

"The jury is still out on whether the Valley's growth will connect it with Prescott," said Nate Nathan with the land brokerage firm Nathan & Associates. "There's demand for growth in the north, but it's not going to happen right away."

Growth that can't go north will likely go west to the White Tanks and southeast to Pinal County. Those areas have transportation woes, but not as many land and water issues.

If the Valley doesn't easily connect with Prescott as soon as it does Tucson, it likely won't affect Arizona's megapolitan status. That status is key to getting more government money for freeways and planning, which could help Yavapai County with some of its growth issues.

More than 200 million people, two-thirds of the U.S. population, currently live in the 10 megapolitan regions. The combined areas are projected to add 85 million people, 64 million jobs and \$33 trillion in construction spending by 2040, according to Robert Lang, co-author of "Land Lines," a 2005 report on megapolitan areas for the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.

"I was skeptical when I heard projections for Phoenix to grow to Prescott Valley," said Grady Gammage, an Arizona real estate attorney and senior research fellow at Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University. "There are many issues, including land use and water, that need to be worked out. But based on current growth and commuting patterns, it will happen. Valley home builders are already there."

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