

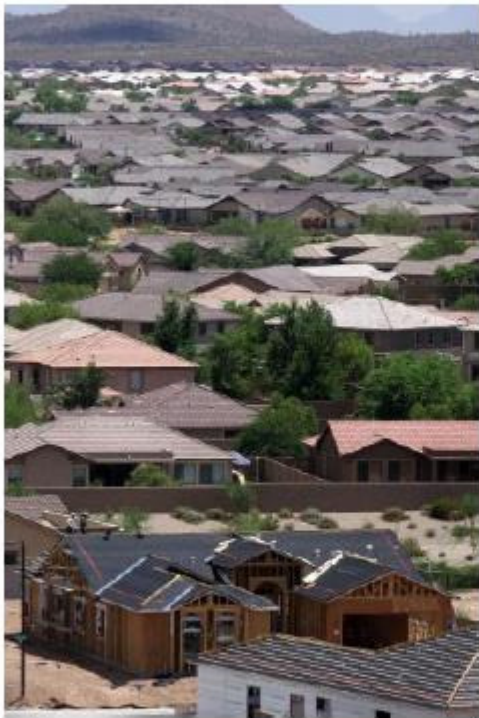
Tribune

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Pinal County plan prepares for 6M people

By Amanda Keim
Tribune



Homes stretch across the horizon Tuesday in Johnson Ranch in Pinal County near Queen Creek.

Tribune

Pinal County could define the housing boom Arizona experienced in the middle of the decade: It doubled in size in less than 10 years and is currently sitting at 350,000 residents.

When growth picks up again, county officials expect the population to eventually reach 6 million people. They don't know when that growth will come, but they want to be prepared when it does.

As a result, a new comprehensive development plan is about to be submitted to the Board of Supervisors.

The plan is the culmination of public meetings, multiple committees and consultations with private firms and public institutions that have occurred since early 2007. It's a plan that looks farther into the future than 10 years, which is normal for comprehensive plans, and instead designates what land uses Pinal County should have when it's built-out.

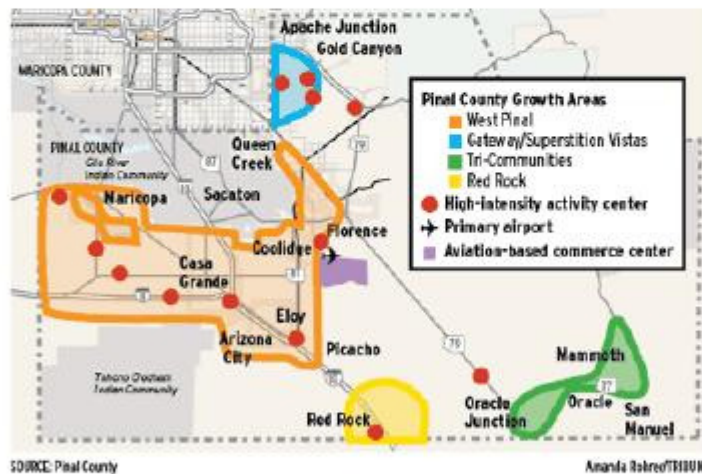
The new plan concentrates on centralizing development, creating economic centers and linking it all with multiple modes of transportation.

"We have a community of exurbs," said Assistant County Manager Ken Buchanan. "We don't have that central core like Maricopa and Pima (counties) do."

Most development is concentrated in the western part of the county, which was to accommodate both the desire of residents in the eastern portion to keep a more rural lifestyle and to protect sensitive wildlife in the area, officials said.

While growth has slowed for the time being, officials are expecting it to accelerate again as East Valley cities like Mesa reach build-out.

"We're looking at long-term planning, not short-term market trends," said Peggy Fiandaca, president of Partners for Strategic Action, a planning firm that worked with the county.



One unusual component of the plan are areas designated as "high intensity activity centers."

Sixteen such centers dot the planning map for Pinal County, most of them in currently unincorporated areas.

Future workers will be more interested in areas that have living, working and recreational activities all in one place, said Planning and Development Director Jerry Stabley.

"When you have these activity centers, you have that community core," Stabley said.

There are areas that could function as downtowns even in places city governments don't exist.

That's partially to correct mistakes from the past. New cities like Maricopa were approved subdivision-by-subdivision without a real economic or activity center, Stabley said.

Designating those areas early on will make it easier to create economic centers, whether it's through a new city government or an annexation by an existing city, Buchanan said.

Several employment centers are also designated throughout the county, many of them running along rail lines, highways or freeways.

Stabley expects some push-back for those proposals from developers who want more flexibility with the land.

But granting too much flexibility doesn't let the county designate employment centers, which are important to sustain an area, Stabley said.

"We don't believe that can happen effectively if it's all master plan communities," he said.

Getting around

Activity and work centers also drive the county's long-term transportation plan.

"Always throughout the Valley we're trying to play catch-up with transportation," Fiandaca said. "We're trying to reverse that."

So instead of waiting until a road or light-rail line is needed and taking land from property owners then, Pinal County is designating the land it needs now, Stabley said.

The county is planning for major and minor roadways, commuter rail, light rail, freight lines and bus service for local transportation.

And most of those modes will tie into another type of employment and transit hub: air travel.

Pinal's airpark

One of the major activity centers envisioned in the plan is a major new passenger-cargo airport near Coolidge connected by rail lines to Phoenix and Tucson.

The concept is a scaled-down version of a regional airport once proposed for Pinal County that was to replace Phoenix Sky Harbor and Tucson International airports. That idea is recognized as no longer viable, said Stabley.

But the new concept still is pretty huge, covering some 70 square miles for the airport and surrounding business development.

Stabley said the airport, envisioned like John Wayne Airport in Orange County, California, could function efficiently with Sky Harbor, Phoenix-Mesa Gateway and Tucson International airports. Its development is as long as 30 years away.

By then, "Gateway will be saturated from the East Valley," opening up the requirement for a fourth major airport in the Phoenix-Tucson corridor, Buchanan said.

Population and market demand will dictate if there's a need for such a large airport in central Pinal County, said Brian Sexton, spokesman for Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.

A more immediate possibility may be the need for a passenger airport on the northwest side of Phoenix to serve the West Valley in the same way that Gateway serves the East Valley, Sexton said.

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Tribune writer Ed Taylor contributed to this report.

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Contact writer: (480) 898-6574 or akeim@evtrib.com



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