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Scenarios outlined for Superstition Vistas

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Tribune



More than 300 area residents turned out to vote and listen to different planning scenarios for the proposed development of Superstition Vistas during a public meeting Gold Canyon. Sept. 1, 2009.

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State and local leaders who are attempting to guide future development on one of the largest swaths of land in the nation say that an amendment to the state constitution is needed to ensure that the 275-square-mile Superstition Vistas isn't built up in a piecemeal and scattered fashion.

That could mean asking for voter approval to allow the Arizona State Land Department, which owns 175,000 acres in the south East Valley, the ability to kick-start long-term development on the property by placing a university or a cluster of industries as an economic catalyst. It would also allow it to guide development along transit corridors and avoid it in sensitive desert ecosystems.

These suggestions are part of a \$1.7 million planning effort by the Superstition Vistas steering committee to develop the area the size of Chandler, Gilbert, Mesa and Tempe combined. And the planners got near-instant feedback through its first major public outreach on the planning area Tuesday night with an interactive presentation before a packed crowd of about 300 at The Views at Superstition in Gold Canyon. The verdict? There's support for some of the ideas and reforms proposed if it means promoting economic development.

Currently, by state law, the department cannot sell land at discounted or no cost to anyone to steer development. Nor can the department spend money to master-plan the land it owns.

But those in favor of "reform" say it's time to educate Arizona voters on the need to make such a change, which would ultimately benefit Arizona schoolchildren.

"That could mean eventually we'd have to go to the voters, to change the constitution," said Roc Arnett, president of East Valley Partnership, which has been instrumental in steering the planning process. "We hope we can build a groundswell of support within the state to accept that state trust land reform in this kind of fashion would be a long-term benefit."

Ninety percent of revenue generated from the state land benefits public schools in Arizona.

Consultant Robert Grow of Utah, who was hired by the East Valley Partnership and Pinal Partnership to come up with different planning scenarios for the area, echoed support.

“It’s a question of, do you let the state Land Department act more like a smart, private owner would, to create a great place that enhances value — and at the same time, it’s going to be a great return,” Grow said.

During a presentation outlining four different development scenarios suggested for the area, with varying degrees of housing density and transportation options, Dee Allsop, chief executive of Heart Mind Strategies, of Washington, D.C., asked the audience to vote on questions related to planning for the area using special voting meters. Within seconds, it revealed 41 percent of the primarily Pinal and Maricopa County residents in the audience who voted want planning to focus on economic development and a better balance of jobs to housing ratio. Twenty percent would like the focus on laying out a variety of transportation options and reducing congestion. But 26 percent also wanted to focus on environmental planning to protect open space and reduce carbon footprint and water use. That would include Pinal County resident Claude Lilly, who said he would not like too much density if it means taking away the region’s walking and hiking trails and “green spaces.”

“Plus, high density creates blight,” Lilly said.

The audience was a mix of citizens wanting to find out about planning for the region, and those representing the development community and government entities.

In 50 years, up to a million people could live at Superstition Vistas. About two-thirds of the audience prefers a variety of single and multifamily homes to be developed.

Former Pinal County Supervisor Sandie Smith said they’d like to move away from the “business as usual” development pattern in the county, which has been one of land splits, without any planning for open space, water or transportation. Sixty percent of developable land in the county is owned by the state Land Department, she noted.

“It would be great to plan it all and decide where to put in freeways, roadways and power lines instead of developing in a hodgepodge style,” added Chuck Backus, chairman of the Superstition Vistas committee and the founding provost for Arizona State University’s Polytechnic campus.

Grow said key variables for planning include options to increase development density, energy efficiency, or using alternative energy sources.

But without reform, the state Land Department would not be able to pursue these choices. That’s because the department would not be able to catalyze development by attracting industries, instead of red tile rooftops, early on.

“State land needs more power than just auctioning off pieces,” Backus said.

The audience seemed to agree. Seventy-three percent were strongly in favor and another 20 percent also agreed somewhat for the need to reform.

Grow cited an example of a private developer who envisioned a medical city that’s now located southeast of Orlando International Airport in Florida, which helped jump-start other development. That, he said, happened by first bringing in a hospital and a medical school.

Allsop had earlier surveyed 200 state leaders and 1,000 Valley residents to gauge their mindset about future development. His research revealed Arizonans want healthy lifestyles, they desire safe and secure communities with an identity and connectivity to a place, “rather than it being just the next suburb down the road,” but that they also fear density.

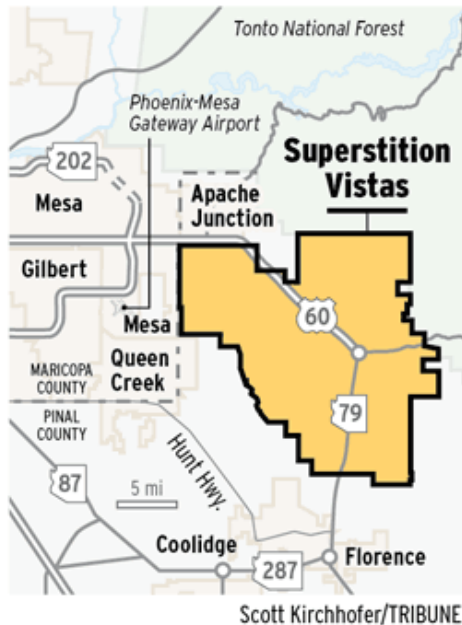
“They don’t understand that density is a way to create livable, walkable communities,” Allsop said, adding that the state leaders are “far more ahead” in support of mixed-use communities with mass transit as a strong element.


That was indicated when the audience demanded a fourth option to a question on density. Some said they’d want no change, while others wanted a plan that went for less density than is currently there in Phoenix.

“We’re not in Phoenix — we want acre lots,” several in the crowd shouted.

But for overall density compared with today, 69 percent wanted higher density with less land consumption, and 31 percent want lower density than today. Backus reminded the audience that this is a huge enough land to accommodate both preferences.

By January, based on the feedback they get, stakeholders hope to carve out a preferred scenario, an amalgam of the ones presented.



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