



Plans forming to redevelop site in Mesa

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The Arizona Republic
Nov. 25, 2007 07:33 PM

Architects and planners are laying the groundwork to redevelop the Mesa Proving Grounds into a unique place instead of a massive project that promotes sprawl and eventually leads to decay.

The 52-square-mile area is one of the last vast pieces of empty land in Arizona's urban landscape, and developers have the opportunity to turn it into something with character, several experts in so-called "placemaking" said at a recent policy discussion.

"Sprawl is a celebration of a lack of commitment," said Vernon Swaback, an architect and planner in Scottsdale who was an apprentice to legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright.

Speaking to a group hosted by the East Valley Partnership on Tuesday, he added, "You may not see exactly what you dream of for the Mesa Proving Grounds, but that's because it doesn't exist yet."

Swaback, a planner for the 1,040 acres around the Wright-influenced Arizona Biltmore [Resort](#) & Spa, said renewal of the Mesa Proving Grounds should take into account the biologically diverse Sonoran Desert and be environmentally smart and sustainable.

"The best urban and community settings convey a place of where we are at all times," he said.

The Mesa Proving Grounds is bounded roughly by Elliot Road, Meridian Road, Queen Creek Road and Higley Road.

The bulk of the area includes 22,000 acres of commercial- and industrial-zoned land plus 5,000 acres of residential land east of the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, formerly known as Williams Gateway Airport. The residential acreage is owned by DMB Associates and Pacific Proving.

Mesa Proving Grounds is considered a plum area because it is not as far-flung as other huge parcels. The area also is close to the Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport and Arizona State University's Polytechnic campus.

More than 8,700 students were enrolled at the campus at the start of this semester, and projections call for that to grow to 10,000 students in the next several years.

Allegiant Air, the airport's commercial carrier, logged 3,200 passengers to seven destinations in its first week of operation. Projections call for the airport to serve up to 1.2 million passengers a year at its build out.

Swaback said the renewed focus on environmental consciousness is coming at a right time for area planners.

Planners are reluctant to compare the Mesa Proving Grounds redevelopment to other projects, although Jill Kusy, director of entitlements for DMB, said some have looked to [Weston](#), Va., and Irvine, Calif., as potential models.

Jim Tinson, chief executive officer of the land planning and architectural firm Hart/Howerton in [New York](#) City and San Francisco, called the Mesa Proving Grounds "an opportunity like never seen before."

"There is no solution out there that we just roll in on the cart," he said.

He also urged planners to focus on creating "places, not projects" because, he said, "Projects have a start and a finish and they're done."

By contrast, places like Central Park in New York City and Faneuil Hall Marketplace in Boston are destinations with longer lives.

"Places are lasting, enduring and what attracts investment over the long term," he said.

Mesa Proving Grounds sits in a Maricopa County island, but Mesa plans to annex it into the city by next summer. In the meantime, the city and a consultant are working on a general plan for the area and expect to rezone the area in March.