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Land battle brewing in south East Valley

By Sarah Boggan
Tribune

The proposed Williams Gateway Freeway and the land surrounding it is causing East Valley cities to draw lines on a map - and in the sand - as Mesa, Apache Junction and Queen Creek each want to claim portions of it for their planning areas. Mesa wants 10 square miles of frontage on the proposed freeway - five on the north side and five on the south. Smaller municipalities Apache Junction and Queen Creek see that land as their next growth area and a future hub for economic development.

Freeway frontage is attractive to retailers and employers, offering a chance to boost tax revenue and add jobs in the municipality - or municipalities - into which the land is annexed.

The land is part of Superstition Vistas, which will be sold off by the State Land Department in coming years and has become the next frontier for East Valley growth. The 275-square-mile area, southeast of Apache Junction in Pinal County, is about the size of Mesa and Gilbert combined. At buildout, it's expected that about 1 million people will call Superstition Vistas home.

The land also is near Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, which Mesa officials say they want to protect from development that could hamper the airport's operation and growth.

Queen Creek has included 5 square miles in its planning area that would become the growing town's only freeway frontage. For Apache Junction, which has freeway frontage on U.S. 60, the freeway would allow the town to grow and diversify its economic base.

Construction is scheduled to begin on the Williams Gateway Freeway, or state Route 802, between 2016 and 2020, Arizona Department of Transportation spokesman Doug Nintzel said.

Former Apache Junction Mayor Doug Coleman said Mesa, which already has major frontage on four area freeways, is pushing the smaller municipalities around.

"It is kind of a David versus Goliath mentality," Coleman said. "Mesa wants to leave Apache Junction with all of the drainage issues coming off the Superstition Mountains while they take all the prime commercial property east of the Pinal County line."

Q.C. BOUNDARY MOVE?

Coleman, who was Apache Junction mayor from 1995 to 2007, said his city had discussed the idea of Queen Creek's boundary moving north to the freeway's south side and Apache Junction's border extending farther east to the freeway's north side, with a tax revenue-sharing agreement covering businesses and industry within a half mile on either side.

"If Mesa were honorable, they would say they have plenty to plan, to develop and redevelop," he said. "They should back out and let Apache Junction and Queen Creek mutually benefit."

The freeway frontage debate resurfaced last week when Queen Creek and Mesa met to discuss a handful of serious issues.

It was the 5-square-mile area Queen Creek had included in its planning area that caused sparks to fly.

Mesa Mayor Keno Hawker objected, as Mesa had laid claim to that land last spring but backed off after nearby cities and towns criticized the move.

"Our No. 1 priority is protecting the airport," said Scott Butler, Mesa's government relations director. "We included it in our planning area to make sure we have a seat at the table for planning it."

Coleman said Mesa is fogging the issue with its mantra of protecting the airport.

"They make it sound like we're not capable (of protecting the airport and planning the area), but the real reason they want that land is that they want the land on both sides of the proposed freeway," Coleman said. "Meridian Road, the county line, has always been the perceived border between our two communities."

Coleman said Mesa has nothing to worry about when it comes to protecting the airport. He said the only thing neighboring municipalities want is a chance to do what Mesa has done.

"Apache Junction and Queen Creek can still benefit from some economies of scale, from some growth," he said. "Mesa was allowed to grow; we're just asking for the same thing. We're not asking to become as large as Mesa, but we do feel like that land south of us in Pinal County belongs to us, historically."

Queen Creek Town Manager John Kross called the land "critical" for his growing town. He said town leaders would like to see the land become an employment zone for Queen Creek.

"We have that mapped as employment, and what we're trying to do is make sure from a fiscal, economic and land-use standpoint that Queen Creek is in a position to provide living-wage jobs," Kross said.

According to a proposed update to Queen Creek's general plan, the town's northern boundary would move east of Meridian Road and north of Germann Road. The update, which would add those 5 crucial square miles, is expected to go before the Queen Creek Town Council for approval in May and to town voters this fall.

Kross said the town has always favored a cooperative planning agreement with Mesa and Apache Junction for the larger area near Superstition Vistas.

"The environment is just so dynamic, and there's just so much change that occurs in the region that we have to be as proactive as possible while still preserving our identity," he said. "It's a complicated issue, but we agree with Mesa, and Mesa agrees with us, that it's in the best interest of everyone to cooperate in the land-use planning of that area."

Kross was not surprised by Mesa's reaction, but he said the town - a part-owner of Phoenix-Mesa Gateway - has no intention of interfering with the airport's success.

"What we're proposing by way of land use is the right mix for preserving the airspace," he said.

TOO SOON FOR CLAIMS

Mesa's Butler said that since all three municipalities are participating in a Superstition Vistas land-use study, it is premature for anyone to lay claim to the land - even though Mesa attempted to do so last year.

"Whoever annexes that land is a question for another day," Butler said. "The State Land Department needs to plan it properly."

Pinal County Supervisor Sandie Smith, D-District 2, said all of the municipalities with an interest in the Superstition Vistas area, located within her district, need to participate cooperatively in the planning process.

"Everybody wants to lay stake, but they can lay stake through the planning process of the Vistas," Smith said. "The idea of fighting over everything is gone; it has to be regional."

Smith said cooperation is essential, and if the cities and towns are concerned about sharing revenue, it should be brought up during planning discussions and could be listed as one of the goals for the area.

"Whenever anybody annexes, they annex with the consent of the landowner, and in this case the owner is the State Land Department," she said. "They have said they want to bring everybody together."



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