

Plans for Gateway urban center aim high

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Not that long ago, a vast swath of land sat far from the buzz of a growing Valley.

It was the home of Williams Air Force Base, which trained generations of airmen for the nation's wars. And the home of the General Motors Desert Proving Ground, where top-secret new cars went through their paces away from prying eyes. And the home, really, of not much else.

But in just a few years, if Valley planners and visionaries are right, this corner of southeast Mesa could be home to a brand-new city.

It will be, if the boldest thinkers have their way, unlike anything this Valley has ever seen.

"This is an opportunity of international significance," said Jim Tinson, a Yale-educated, New York-based architect and urban planner working on the project.

Mesa hopes to create an internationally known destination with high-rise corporate office buildings, world-class resorts, an efficient mix of transportation and housing centered around Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport and tech-heavy college campuses.

Planners stress that the current economic downturn and housing slump would not affect the overall long-term vision, which they expect to unfold over decades and through multiple economic cycles.

Swords into plowshares

Visions for the Gateway area already have far surpassed what anyone could have imagined in 1991 when then-Defense Secretary Dick Cheney said Williams Air Force Base would close. Almost from the minute Cheney targeted the base for closure, Valley development officials began laying plans to turn it into a civilian aviation center with educational and business components.

The base was rechristened Williams Gateway Airport a few days before it closed, and only this fall became Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport.

Even a decade and a half ago, some saw world-class potential in the area.

In September 1993, then-County Supervisor Tom Rawles called it "a golden opportunity to create something that is one of a kind in the world, which is the education, research and training in conjunction with the airport."

Rawles now sits on the Mesa City Council, watching as a host of factors came together to fuel the Gateway vision.

Those factors include the maturing of the airport, the arrival of freeways, the looming departure of GM

and aggressive plans by DMB Associates of Scottsdale to begin developing the GM site as early as summer 2009.

Thinking big - really big

With all those factors congealing, the East Valley Partnership asked the Urban Land Institute in 2006 to assess the Gateway area's potential. Amid a sea of raw statistics (65,000 students at buildout; 5,000 new hotel rooms; seven new golf courses), ULI called Gateway "a project of extraordinary proportion and potential regional and super-regional impact."

ULI compared Gateway to areas such as Irvine, Calif., Reston, Va., and other recent master-planned developments in the United States.

Others are thinking bigger than that. John Kasarda, a professor at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill, is credited with creating the term "aerotropolis," denoting a new type of 21st-century city whose airport is an integral and all but undistinguishable part of the urban core.

Airports, he believes, are becoming more important to cities than traditional downtowns and have begun to serve as destinations in their own right, not merely points of arrival and departure.

Speaking to a large crowd in downtown Mesa in October, Kasarda said Gateway might eventually have more in common with Amsterdam Airport Schiphol in the Netherlands than with any new developments in the United States.

Can Mesa pull it off?

Mesa only lately joined the ranks of the nation's largest cities. The latest census figures put Mesa at No. 38 nationally, bigger than St. Louis, Cleveland, Pittsburgh and Miami.

Mesa also traditionally has been one of the most conservative cities in Arizona.

A study now under way will recommend ways for Mesa to pay for the massive, complex infrastructure and other costs of Gateway development. But Mesa City Manager Chris Brady openly worried about that during a recent City Council meeting.

He noted that without a municipal property tax (voters rejected one in 2006), Mesa relies on sales taxes and state aid for most of its budget. If Gateway develops without major retail components, he said, "it would have a significant impact on city services because it wouldn't be generating the dollars to pay for itself."

Indeed, Mesa's reliance on sales taxes has plunged the city into a budget crunch as retail sales slow nationwide.

Departments have been asked to trim spending, hiring is on hold and Mesa is laying off 35 employees from its building-safety department, which is supported entirely by construction-permit fees.

But economists and planners believe the Gateway vision will weather this and other storms.

"The next handful of years might prove to be difficult," economist Elliott Pollack said in a recent Gateway

evaluation. But, he added, short-term difficulties "will ultimately have minimal impact on the long-range strategic plan" for the Gateway airport area.

Kasarda said Mesa can't afford to fumble the opportunity.

"An aerotropolis in some form is going to occur. The critical question is, will it form and grow in an organized, economically efficient, aesthetically pleasing and sustainable manner? Or is the development around Gateway going to be spontaneous, haphazard, less than efficient, unsightly and ultimately unsustainable?"

"The future," he told Mesa leaders in October, "is in your hands."