

ARIZONA

A publication of the League of Arizona Cities and Towns | Spring 2018

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Arizona: Suburbs, Sprawl, and Sustainability



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*Lessons from Sustaining Phoenix* by Grady Gammage Jr.

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## Adapting for Success



**It is fascinating to revisit the issues surrounding city growth in this issue of *Arizona City & Town* magazine as we did in our first issue more than 10 years ago. At that time, we were in the midst of a housing and population boom that seemed to have no end. Even though there were some warning signs, few anticipated the severity of the Great Recession that was just around the corner.**

As noted in our feature article, we are still recovering from that devastating economic downturn and its impact on how cities and towns prioritize services and plan for future challenges. Just in the last year, most city budgets are getting back to their pre-recession levels, but nearly without exception, cities have fewer employees, and are doing municipal business more efficiently and cost-effectively than before.

Some of the changes that have happened include decisions to contract out certain services to the private sector; to consolidate city departments and assign staff to multi-task, reduce or eliminate some functions; and to partner with other cities and towns to share some staff and functions. I'm sure you could add more examples from your own experience.

The amazing thing about this situation is that our residents have seen very few changes in the level of service they receive from Arizona cities and towns. City-elected officials and staff seem to have it in their DNA to get the job done to benefit all our citizens regardless of the unseen challenges in making that happen.

It is a tremendous credit to the leadership of our mayors and councils, and their professional staff, that residents in our cities and towns enjoy a quality of life that ranks among the very best in the nation.

Cities and towns consistently rank as the most trusted level of government to spend tax dollars, as they should. Let's hope we don't have to go through another experience like the Great Recession, but let's continue to use the lessons we learned in that difficult time to deliver efficient and effective municipal services to our citizens.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ken Strobeck". The signature is fluid and cursive.

Ken Strobeck  
Executive Director

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## Growth and Promise



When *Arizona City & Town* magazine debuted more than a decade ago, the focus of the premier issue was the year 2020, and what the future would look like for our state and its municipalities. Fast forward to today (and this edition), where a very thoughtful piece by Grady Gammage Jr. frames the current state of American cities and towns from his unique perspective.

We have all come a long way since 2007. We did not anticipate the Great Recession. It was a tremendous challenge for local leaders, as we worked to absorb lost funding while facing business closures, growing unemployment and increased angst among residents and employees. But you know what? We persevered. We took proper actions to ensure the long-term health of our respective communities, despite very painful short-term measures. Some cities and towns took longer to pull out of the economic storm — some still feel those lingering effects today.

But as the elected representatives of our citizenry, we have moved forward. And as we close in on 2020, the outlook is encouraging. In my State of the City address earlier this year, I spoke about how, as a Chandler native, I've been lucky enough to experience much of our city's growth. From neighborhoods to flourishing educational and medical communities, to a dynamic business community — it has been rewarding to watch it all unfold. And I am grateful to the residents of Chandler for allowing me to play such an active role.

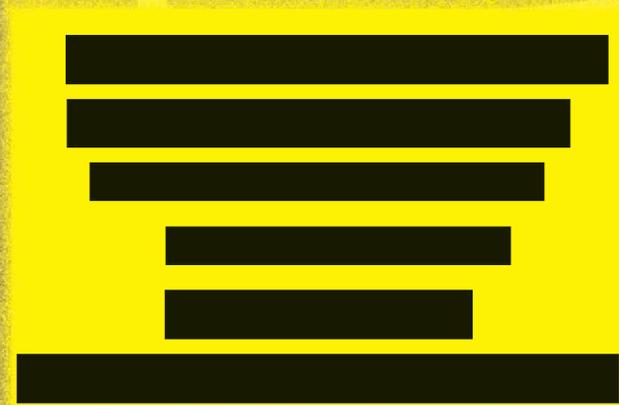
I hope all League members appreciate the gift we have been given. To play a role in the continued development of Arizona's cities and towns is exciting. While it can also have its challenges and the occasional headache, I can think of no better experience.

Sincerely,

Jay Tibshraeny  
League President  
Mayor, City of Chandler



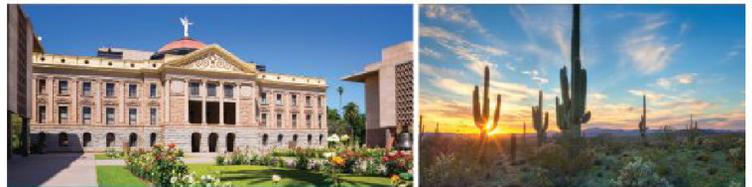
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# MEET THE LEAGUE'S EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

League activities are directed by a 25-member Executive Committee, consisting of mayors and councilmembers from across the state.

Committee officers are elected to two-year terms. Committee members are elected to one- or two-year overlapping terms. Members and officers of the Executive Committee are determined by all League members at the League's Annual Conference through a process coordinated by a Nominating Committee. The Executive Committee is the governing body of the League.



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Mayor, Gilbert



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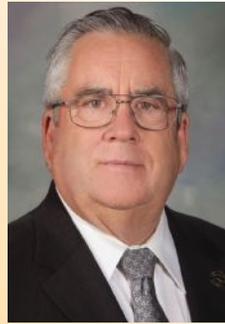
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# DID YOU KNOW?

## FUN FACTS ABOUT ARIZONA'S CITIES AND TOWNS

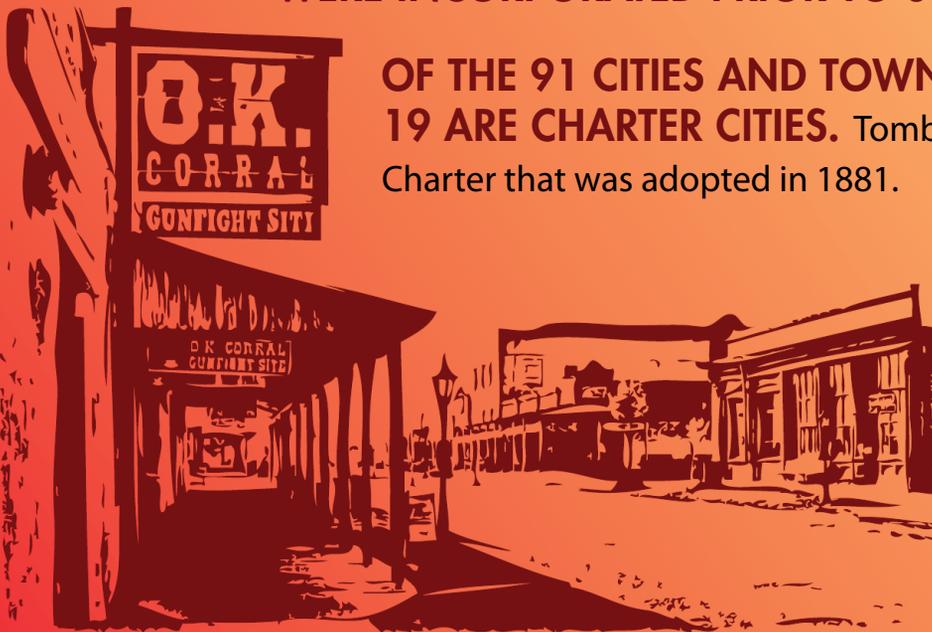
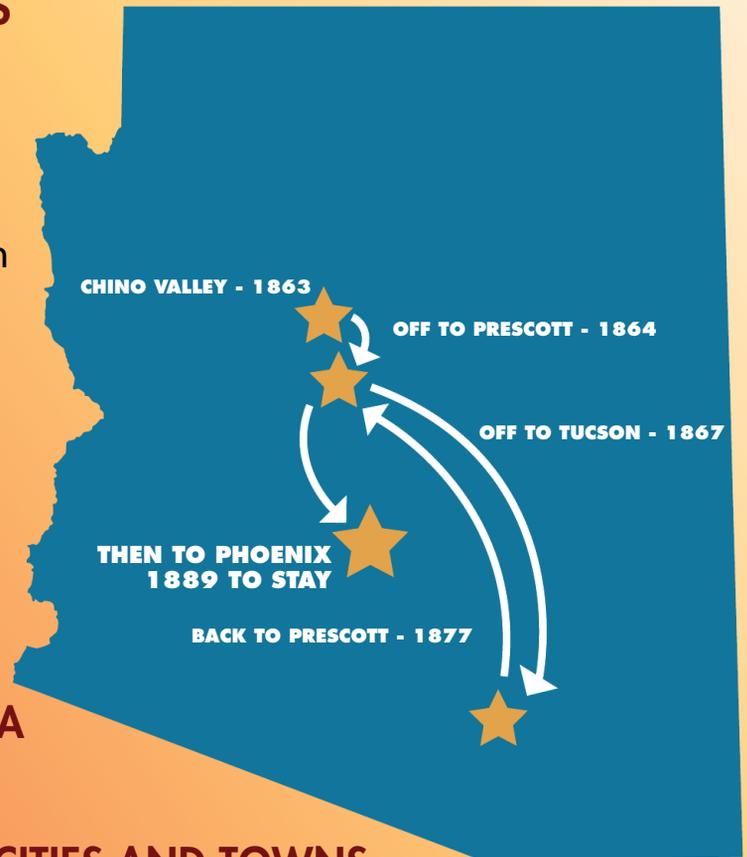
**FOUR ARIZONA CITIES AND TOWNS HAVE HELD THE DISTINCTION AS ARIZONA'S STATE CAPITAL.** The Town of Chino Valley was designated the first Territorial Capital in 1863. The capital city was then moved to Prescott in 1864, Tucson in 1867, and back to Prescott in 1877. Phoenix was declared the permanent capital city in 1889.

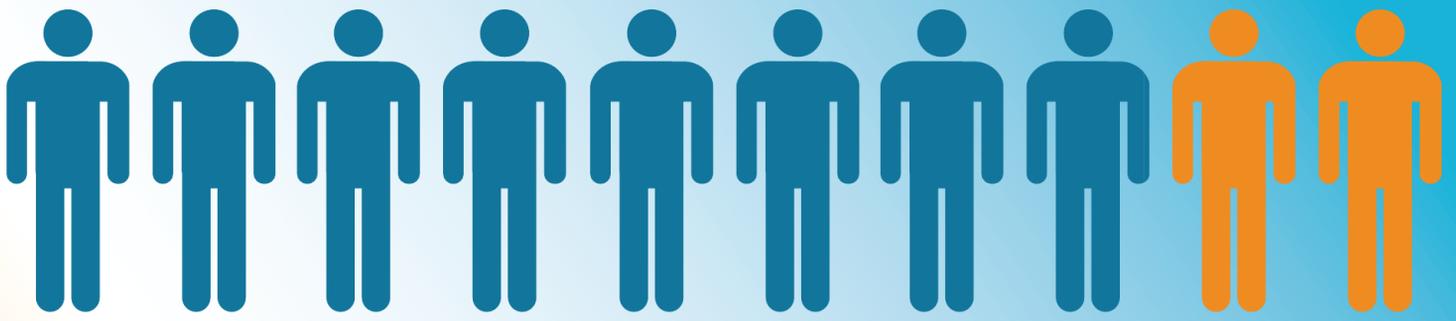
**PHOENIX IS ARIZONA'S LARGEST CITY,** with a population of 1.4 million. Winkelman is Arizona's smallest city, with a population of 353.

**37 CITIES AND TOWNS IN ARIZONA HAVE NO PROPERTY TAX.**

**TWENTY OF ARIZONA'S CITIES AND TOWNS WERE INCORPORATED PRIOR TO STATEHOOD.**

**OF THE 91 CITIES AND TOWNS IN ARIZONA, 19 ARE CHARTER CITIES.** Tombstone has a Territorial Charter that was adopted in 1881.





**79%** of Arizonans live in one of the state's 91 incorporated cities and towns.

**ARIZONA RANKS #10 IN THE NATION IN THE PERCENTAGE OF RESIDENTS WHO LIVE IN URBAN AREAS ACCORDING TO THE US CENSUS BUREAU.**

**CAMP VERDE IS OFFICIALLY RECOGNIZED AS THE GEOGRAPHIC CENTER OF THE STATE OF ARIZONA.** This was determined by the Arizona Professional Land Surveyors who identified the town as the municipality nearest to the center. An official gubernatorial proclamation was issued to recognize this designation in 2012.



**TWO UNITED STATES SUPREME COURT JUSTICES HAVE TIES TO ARIZONA TOWNS** – Former Chief Justice William H. Rehnquist served as the Town of Paradise Valley's legal counsel in the 1960s. Sandra Day O'Connor, the first woman appointed to the U.S. Supreme Court, grew up on a large family ranch in the Town of Duncan.

**THE TERRITORIAL PRISON IN THE CITY OF YUMA** once housed many of Arizona's most dangerous and notorious criminals, from 1876 until 1909. Today, the penitentiary is one of Arizona's most-visited state parks.





# Suburbs, Sprawl and Sustainability

In the summer of 2007, the League published its inaugural issue of *Arizona City and Town* magazine. The feature article in that first issue was, “Where Are We Growing: 2020 and Beyond,” which explored the challenges and opportunities we were encountering at that time as our state’s population was expanding. Now, just over 10 years later and on the cusp of 2020, we thought it would be appropriate to revisit the topic of how we are growing and if this growth is sustainable into the future. Our feature article in this issue is excerpted with edits from the chapter, “Suburbs, Sprawl and Sustainability” in the book *The Future of the Suburban City: Lessons from Sustaining Phoenix* by Grady Gammage Jr.

Cities are living organisms. They grow, flourish, wither, and sometimes die. Throughout history, once robust cities have reached points of economic obsolescence and have declined. Some vanish, like Babylon and Ur. Others, like Venice, become essentially museums of themselves. Some survive, but shrink dramatically — like Detroit or St. Louis.

St. Louis was once the greatest boomtown in America. The gateway to the West, St. Louis saw the Mississippi River as the forever-paramount avenue of commerce in the United States. But it turned out railroads were more important than the river, and Chicago placed its bet on railroads. In the 1890s, St. Louis was the fourth-largest city in America. In 2014, it was the 60th largest city in America, with about 318,000 people. Today Mesa, Arizona, has nearly 150,000 more people than St. Louis.<sup>1</sup> As the world becomes ever more urban, the long-term prospects for the survival of individual cities is often critiqued, ranked, and debated. The term “sustainability” is the most frequent fabric of this conversation. The new



Rendering of Pueblo Grande, the ancient and vanished Hohokam settlement, on the banks of what is now the Salt River where Phoenix and Tempe are located today.



Low-density housing and urban sprawl, common in the Phoenix and Tucson metro areas and prevalent in many suburban western city landscapes.

cities of post-war America generally fare poorly in these discussions. Built on the automobile and the single-family home, these cities are casually indicted for profligate resource consumption, low-density sprawl and a mindless addiction to real estate development.

Even before Andrew Ross labeled Phoenix “the world’s least sustainable place” in his 2011 book *Bird on Fire*, the city often served as an exemplar of such a place: isolated, dry, hot, and surely one of the most improbable, and therefore, least sustainable big cities on earth.<sup>2</sup> Bill deBuys wrote about the city’s impending doom from climate change: “If cities were stocks, you’d short Phoenix.”<sup>3</sup>

Despite the criticism of the “suburban cities,” which arose in the last half of twentieth century, America, Las Vegas, Phoenix, Salt Lake, Dallas, Tucson, San Bernardino, and San Diego continue to be among the fastest-growing places in the United States. In December of 2014, *The Economist* looked at world cities.<sup>4</sup> The “great urbanisation” (as they spell it) is frequently invoked in a discussion of the planet’s future: a world in which most people live in cities. The point of their analysis was that these global cities are looking increasingly suburban. Chinese, Indian, and Brazilian cities are all experiencing declines in density. Since 1970, Beijing’s density has dropped by 75 percent. (Even at that, it is still about five times denser than places like Phoenix). Worldwide, the few cities that are becoming denser are places like Los Angeles, Las Vegas, and Phoenix, that started out less dense to begin with.

More than 60 years ago, the late Jane Jacobs examined the plight of American cities in one of the most insightful pieces of urban analysis ever written, *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*.<sup>5</sup> The book is remembered as a screed against the perils of city planning, which she saw as an interference with the natural evolution of cities and the complex and intricate relationship between individual land uses. Today, her book tends to be remembered as a paean to places like Greenwich Village: pedestrian environments with a rich mix of uses, a layered texture of building types, sizes, and ages, and an ongoing generational drama played out in a largely unplanned “ballet of the street.” Jacobs would not have liked places like Phoenix.



Aerial view of the “Valley of Sun” stretching into the distance.



Freeways like the 101 in the northwest valley have allowed for greater expansion of the suburban landscape and lifestyle.

Cities that grew in the latter half of the twentieth century were based not on intricate pedestrian interactions but on the convenience of automobiles. But perhaps Jacobs’ greatest gift to thinking about the nature of cities was her application of observational logic to thinking about the way cities evolve, grow, and possibly die. She taught us that cities are the products of millions of individual decisions about how people want to live, to work, to recreate, and to interact. Those individual, incremental decisions are made in a particular context: an economic context as the city grows and matures, and a technological context that exists for horizontal or vertical movement at different speeds and varying distances. Cities also evolve in a political context — a determination of how to negotiate the social contract between the needs of society and the rights of the individual.

It is possible to apply Jacobs’ analytical tools to the cities that grew up later than her favorite places. The same forces that operated to cause decline in the great cities of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries were also operating to shape the cities of the latter half of the twentieth century. These changing forces dispersed populations that had previously been concentrated. The first, most obvious, and most examined of these urban change agents was the automobile, which made it suddenly possible for any given piece of property to be nearly equally accessible. The automobile served as an agent of destruction to the older industrial cities that had been built around streetcar commuting or pedestrian activity. Cars dispersed cities, causing a decline in overall population density of older places. The automobile also begat the parking lot, an urban dead zone — hostile to pedestrians, hot, and uninviting.

City populations were also being dispersed by the dominance of the single-family detached home as a preferred lifestyle. The individual detached home had long been an aspirational goal of Ameri-



cans, but as the twentieth century rolled on, it became attainable for ever larger numbers. Together, the automobile and the single-family home would rewrite the nature of American urbanization.

While these forces were operating to disperse the American population, there were simultaneously countervailing forces in operation. The first of these was the rise of air travel as a dominant mode of interurban transportation. When the railroad was the dominant means to getting from one place to another, small- and medium-sized cities were well served, but air travel acted as a force of concentration. Airports take a lot of room and cannot be too close together.

As the American West began to urbanize, it posed particular challenges, which also played out in other forces of concentration. The greatest of these challenges was the need to capture, store, and deliver water to particular locations. Beyond the hundredth meridian, in Wallace Stegner’s memorable phrase,<sup>6</sup> “where there is less than ten inches of rain per year, water provides an organizing” principle, a dominating urban force, a power of concentrating population where water delivery makes possible a city.

These forces of concentration and dispersal, coupled with the advent of zoning and planning that played out in the context of postwar American growth, resulted in a different urban fabric. These forces created the suburban city. *The Economist’s* review noted that suburbanization has been blamed on racism, on Euclidean zoning, on production homebuilding, on television, on air conditioning, on federal mortgage policies, and above all, on cars. But in examining the global phenomenon, *The Economist* found a simpler cause transcended all of these factors: “The real cause was mass affluence. As people grew richer, they demanded more privacy and space. Only a few could afford that in city centres; the rest moved out.”<sup>7</sup> An international version of “drive ‘til you qualify.”

\*\*\*\*\*

Any city is by definition a concentration of people supported by drawing on a larger geographic resource base. Cities have always been places where farm goods are brought to market. To build any city requires quarrying, mining, and harvesting natural resources



The vast canal system that supplies the metro Phoenix area with a majority of its water.



Roosevelt Dam, part of the great engineering system that helps to provide much of the water to the valley.

from a larger area and transporting them to where people live. Historically, as cities grew larger, the region supporting them expanded. The construction technologies of the late 20th century raised the relationship of cities and their supporting “resource shed” to a new level. Particularly in the American Southwest, the ability to transport water thousands of miles through canals and pipes and to store it behind huge dams meant that a place could exist based on snowfall hundreds of miles away.

The twin hallmarks of the suburban city are the urban fabric built around single-family homes and the automobile, and the need to capture resources from farther and farther away to support an urban population. Yet today, it is these two factors that lead to the relentless criticism of the suburban city as a kind of giant demographic misstep.

When Jacobs wrote about the death and life of great American cities, she never used the word “sustainability.” Her book was 25 years too early for sustainability to be the particular lens through which to examine and critique cities. Today, sustainability is *the* filter through which we view the future. To label a place or practice “unsustainable” is to offer a secular damnation of great moment.

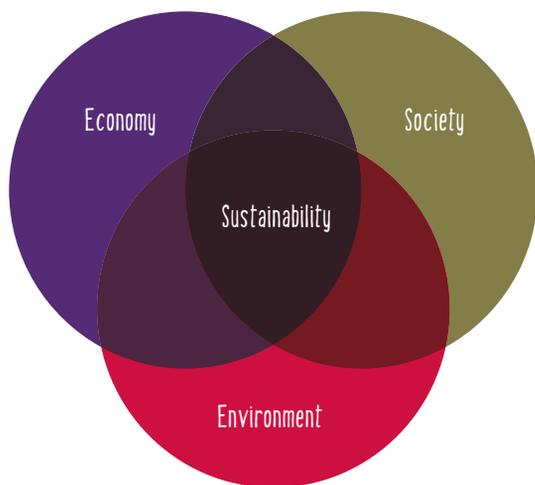
In a 2006 radio interview on NPR, author Simon Winchester was discussing his book about the San Francisco earthquake, *A Crack at*

*the Edge of the World*.<sup>8</sup> At the end of his talk he proposed that there were at least three American cities that “should never have been built” — San Francisco because of earthquake faults; New Orleans in the wake of Hurricane Katrina; and Phoenix because “there’s no water there.” Winchester’s off-the-cuff remarks represented one small effort to analyze the sustainability of American cities. For three completely different reasons he suggested that three particular cities were so unsustainable they should have never been built in the first place.

The term sustainability is generally thought to have originated in the 1987 UN Report *Our Common Future*.<sup>9</sup> Usually referred to as the Brundtland report, it defined sustainability as: “meeting the needs of present generations while not compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Hosts of other parallel definitions are used in search of giving sustainability that kind of “I know it when I see it” familiarity. These include: “don’t eat your seed corn,” or “treating the earth as though we intend to stay,” or Gifford Pinchot’s statement describing conservation as “the greatest good for the greatest number for the longest time.” Sustainability is sometimes described as three overlapping circles of a Venn diagram where economic performance, social equity, and environmental quality come together and create a sweet spot.



While these definitions serve well to help capture the intuitive logic of sustainability, it often remains an elusive concept. One dilemma is over what geographic scale the measurement of “life in balance” is supposed to be assessed. Globally? Nationally? Or on a statewide or metropolitan level? Bell and Morse in *Measuring Sustainability*<sup>10</sup> do an admirable job of attempting to catalog the various attempts at creating indicators of sustainability or sustainable development. Importantly, they recognize that one of the inherent problems in identifying whether or not a place is sustainable is in defining what the geography of the “place” actually is. The most logical political geography against which to measure sustainability



progress is that of the nation-state. That is, after all, generally where the greatest repository of political power resides and has historically been treated as a discrete functioning society. While the survival of many nation-states depends upon foreign trade, such trade is the subject of treaties and conscious action unlike the more casual economic interchange between cities or smaller units of government. Since trade at the national level is a subject of explicit policy choices, such choices can be subject to sustainability analysis and influence.

Yet, most of the analytical tools developed for measuring and comparing sustainability are aimed at the city or metropolitan level. In the U.S. this has logical roots since many of the individual components of sustainability policy are decided locally. There are so many books, monographs, and websites rating the sustainability of cities that there are even multiple reviews of the rating systems. In most of the scorecards that have been developed, the suburban cities of the American Sunbelt fare poorly.

When southwestern suburban cities are reviewed, they are often cavalierly dismissed as unsustainable. When the website *gawker.com* sought to state the worst states in America, Arizona was rated number one for being an “ecological catastrophe so insanely destructive that they have mist sprayers cooling air even though there is no water there.”<sup>11</sup> *Sustainlane.com* in 2008 rated the sustainability of cities.

The bottom half of the list essentially ran across the southwestern Sunbelt: Fort Worth, Dallas, El Paso, Albuquerque, San Diego, Los Angeles, Tucson, Mesa, and Phoenix. At 32nd, Phoenix was rated low because its water is moved from far away.<sup>12</sup>

Some more thorough and apparently scientific rankings also reach negative conclusions. On the Siemens Green City Index, Phoenix is 24th out of 27 American cities.<sup>13</sup> When Smart Growth America in 2014 rated American cities for “sprawl” on a complex, four-part matrix, Phoenix came out 173rd and Tucson 171st with a host of other American Sunbelt cities in the same neighborhood.<sup>14</sup> Suburban cities are certainly more dependent on the automobile than European and a handful of older American cities. But the Smart Growth America sprawl rankings also have curious anomalies. Phoenix at 173rd receives a composite score of about 78. Las Vegas, by contrast, ranks 39th with a composite score of 121. Yet the two cities are relatively close on individual rankings except with regard to “activity centering.” On this measurement, Vegas fares well because most people work on the Strip and it is viewed as a “downtown.” In Phoenix, on the other hand, jobs are spread throughout the metropolitan area, which actually distributes commuting patterns and lowers overall traffic congestion.

\*\*\*\*\*

Are suburban cities sustainable? Not a simple question, but one that is too often dismissed with a cavalierly simple answer. The casual dismissal of suburban cities as unsustainable because of “sprawl” is not supportable, though it does represent an understandable, if biased, instinct. Places that grew up on the automobile and the single-family home need to dramatically change and evolve. Just as pre-automobile cities had to readjust their urban fabric and density in response to the automobile, so the suburban cities of America will need to adapt to future changes. The difference is that in the 21st century change and adaptation will happen at an ever-faster pace.

The overlap between suburban cities and the cities of the arid west is huge, for the growth curves coincided. So cities like Phoenix are doubly condemned — both dry and sprawling. The impulse to view cities of the arid west as unsustainable in the face of climate change is similarly simplistic but not fully supportable. Such cities were built based on great plumbing systems that move water long distances. The availability of that water is heavily challenged. These challenges will force adaptation and tough choices with regard to the survival of agriculture, the nature of landscape, and the behavior of human populations. Yet, the ability to move water remains, and the supplies, though challenged, are not going to simply vanish.

Supplying the water necessary to support a big city in a dry place has been the central challenge from the birth of cities like Phoenix. It is not realistic to assume that a challenge which has been met again and again in the past suddenly represents an insurmountable barrier.

Sunbelt suburban cities, which became comfortable places to live only when air conditioning was an available technology, will undoubtedly be challenged by what we used to call “global warming.” In Phoenix, an ever-hotter future is not an attractive prospect; there are days in which the place already seems uninhabitable. To imagine it seven or 10 degrees Fahrenheit hotter is almost unthinkable. One aspect of such heat is a local phenomenon called the heat island effect that scientists and urban planners in metropolitan Phoenix and other hot weather cities are studying and finding ways to mitigate. Some aspects of climate change that likely will increase maximum temperatures are not rooted in local, and therefore locally manageable, causes. The global impact of greenhouse gasses on maximum temperatures will have to be accommodated through increased reliance on the technologies of air conditioning, construction, and landscaping. Yet again, to assume that high temperatures represent an insurmountable obstacle for places like Phoenix belies the history of dealing with such a challenge. It is easier to manage against steadily rising high temperature than rising sea level or extraordinary natural events like tornadoes and hurricanes.

Suburban cities are recognizing the need to modify the pattern of their built environments in both transportation and land use changes. Los Angeles, Phoenix, Denver, Salt Lake, Las Vegas, and a host of other suburban cities have expanded transit opportunities, and in many cases built rail systems, to move people about without always needing an automobile. These transportation changes both

react to and provoke changes in land use patterns. Increasingly consumers are choosing to live at higher densities and with less reliance on the automobile. The continued evolution of work away from being tethered to an individual factory or office is already beginning to profoundly alter the built environment and the transportation dynamic of all American cities.

Into this evolutionary stew a once Jetsons-like fantasy is rapidly becoming real: not flying cars but driverless cars. The prospect of driverless vehicles, which are smaller, lighter, and likely not powered



The light rail has brought a change in transit options to metro Phoenix commuters.



A summer dust storm, or haboob, rolling into the Phoenix area.

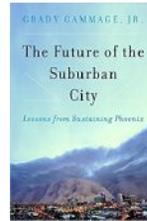
by internal combustion engines, is becoming real so quickly as to be almost incomprehensible. Transportation on demand and purchased only as needed will almost certainly help preserve and sustain the suburban city lifestyle.

So is the suburban city sustainable? Are the metro Phoenix and Tucson areas sustainable? Answer: probably, so long as they maintain the ability to change and adapt at an ever faster pace. ■

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