

Phoenix, Arizona

“A horizontal hymn to unsustainable development” is how sociologist Andrew Ross opens his 2011 book, *Bird on Fire: Lessons from the World’s Least Sustainable City*, a subtitle that has continued to spur public debate and has helped to prompt concerted action. The city has relied upon a model of sprawl and subdivision development, as well as water diversions from the Colorado River in an era of increasing scarcity, aridity, and rising temperatures. Nonetheless, in recent years, efforts have been ongoing to make the city more sustainable.

Background

- *form of government*: council/manager
- *population*: approximately 1.68 million people as of 2019, and part of the fastest growing U.S. metropolis over the past half-century, now over four million people
- *geography and land area*: land area of approximately 518 square miles; a desert city with very little rainfall; it ranks the highest of cities with days over 99 degrees Fahrenheit and its average nighttime temperatures have risen 11-degrees in the postwar period; water largely allocated by historical pacts on diversions from the Colorado River, in addition to the local Salt and Verde Rivers

Postwar development model:

- *retirees*: the city attracted people from various parts of the country, but notably many Midwestern white retirees in search of affordable and air-conditioned homes, often with private swimming pools and membership-only golf courses in segregated subdivisions.
- *cultural narratives*: such as consuming “the desert oasis lifestyle,” have informed political, economic, and planning choices.
- *land speculation*: the main industry has been land speculation and home construction, with concomitant boom and bust cycles especially exaggerated in Phoenix.
- *subprime loans*: many were also attracted by subprime loans before the housing bust of 2008; by this time, Phoenix trailed all other major cities in per capita income.
- *industry*: younger workers were recruited to aerospace industries and then to electronics factories and call centers, many of which later moved offshore.
- *residential segregation*: those employed in such industries at low-wage and nonunionized jobs, especially Latinos and African Americans, were compelled by deed restrictions – later, zoning codes, and then covenants, conditions, and restrictions (CC&Rs) – as well as affordability, to settle in South Phoenix, where industrial facilities with more than their share of environmental hazards were concentrated.

- *electric power*: generation from coal extended far out of the metropolitan area into Navajo lands.
- *Mountains Preserve*: in the mid-1960s, the Teen Committee to Save Camelback Mountain, with chapters at twenty-six schools and a petition 322 feet 6 inches in length, mobilized high school students through dances and concerts to help stop encroaching development; an expanded Mountains Preserve emerged over the next decade with further civic action, city funding, and federal support.
- *politics*: the epicenter of Goldwater conservatism with strong libertarian ideologies and anti-tax sentiments.

While now a majority Democratic city, its form of governance had become council/manager during the municipal reform movement of the early- and mid-twentieth century and was heavily influenced by real estate interests. It was also constrained by a conservative state legislature, lax enforcement of groundwater regulations, and a tax law that prohibited more than 10 percent of city budgets to come from property taxes.

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Phoenix Futures Forum

This 18-month visioning process in 1988-1989 helped to chart a new path for the city.

- *Citizens for District Elections*: Terry Goddard co-chaired Citizens for District Elections to replace at-large council elections to give more leverage to neighborhoods and civic associations and to spur council diversity; the measure passed in 1982.
- *Mayor Goddard*: when elected mayor (1984-1990), Goddard increased participation in neighborhood planning and established the basis for a new neighborhoods department.
- *Peirce Report*: inspired by the work of the [National Civic League](#) (NCL) on civic engagement and community visioning, and prompted by NCL-affiliate Neal Peirce’s widely read 1987 “Peirce Report,” Goddard and the city’s planning director, Rod Engelen, convened the Phoenix Futures Forum in 1988. The report had been commissioned by the publisher of the city’s two major newspapers, the *Arizona Republic* and *The Phoenix Gazette*, and was delivered on the same Sunday to over 500,000 homes.
- *forum design*: included four major forums spaced several months apart, followed by a “civic summit,” and various work group meetings and mini-forums throughout. Chris Gates, NCL vice-president, facilitated the process.

The Futures Forum enabled multi-stakeholder deliberations at the neighborhood and city levels lasting some 18 months. The city, along with several private organizations and the mayor – from his personal retirement fund as a sign of his deep commitment – provided funding, and some 3,500 participated in the forums and workgroups.

Ninety-five people served on a general policy committee and 250 people served on nine task forces. Herb Ely drove the work of the policy committee on a virtually daily, full-time basis for fifteen months. As an attorney and counsel with the NAACP, he had drafted Arizona's civil rights act of 1965, and he had defended and often joined black youth in protest events.

A final report and vision statement was issued in January 1990, along with a commitment to an implementation process.

- *action groups*: Mayor Paul Johnson (1990-1994) reorganized the city council subcommittee structure to align more effectively with the Forum's subsequent six action groups, which included: 1) arts, culture, and recreation; 2) basic economic resources; 3) citizenship and governance; 4) environment and resources; 5) neighborhoods and community; and 6) transportation and urban form. New civic, professional, and business leaders emerged in a variety of areas and were drawn into further efforts as "action partners."

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Emerging alternatives

Despite the daunting challenges of transforming Phoenix into a sustainable city, hopeful signs and positive alternatives have emerged on a variety of fronts.

- *general perspective*: Grady Gammage, Jr., a local scholar and influential voice within the city, presents a more hopeful outlook in his book, *The Future of the Suburban City*. While recognizing that arid Western cities built around the automobile and single-family homes, "need to change and evolve dramatically," he nonetheless makes an extended

case that Phoenix is considerably more sustainable than typically thought and has a viable trajectory forward.

While Phoenix, like much of the Southwest, has faced serious drought in recent years, Arizona's limits on groundwater pumping since 1980 have protected the aquifers of Central Arizona relatively well, argues Gammage. Its shift away from agricultural uses of land to subdivisions has entailed decreased overall water use.

Homeowners have further reduced per capita water consumption – high by national urban standards – and new construction of homes with swimming pools is plummeting to as low as 10 percent.

Solar energy has advanced considerably, including recent shifts on Navajo land, and has much greater potential if political and institutional obstacles can be overcome.

The light rail system, finished in 2008 and coincident with the flow of students from Arizona State University's Tempe campus – which decided to become an institutional model of sustainability – to its newer downtown Phoenix campus, has been relatively effective in riders per mile compared to peer cities; its success led to the ballot approval of a \$30 billion transportation plan in 2015, which included further light rail extensions, bike lanes, and bus improvements.

Light rail has, in turn, spurred greater housing density and transit oriented development, although overall housing density in Phoenix has not been especially low.

In 2009, Mayor Phil Gordon (2004-2012) announced the intention to make the city the greenest in the nation, and his successor, Greg Stanton (2012-2018), appointed its first sustainability officer to help meet the challenge of the Andrew Ross epithet of “least sustainable city.”

Some other recent studies of the Colorado River system, while not underestimating the enormous complexity and uncertainty of the challenges, see considerable evidence of strategies for conserving and sharing water, as well as for collaboration and restoration

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- *neighborhoods*: in 1993, the city also implemented a Neighborhood Initiative Area program aimed to include many forms of community-based action and innovation, especially in lower-income and blighted areas, each with an interdepartmental team to coordinate efforts across agencies and to help catalyze integrative neighborhood planning that engaged ordinary residents.

The absence of vast pockets of concentrated poverty made it more feasible for the city to target manageable areas. The combination of professional management and civic engagement has won the city recognition with awards by some of the most prominent organizations in the governance field, including the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), as well as NCL's All-America City Award.

Nonetheless, while the institutional infrastructure survives and extends to even larger areas of revitalization, such as West Phoenix, the rapid appreciation of home prices prior to 2007, followed by the housing bust – especially severe in Phoenix – dispersed or debilitated many of the home owners key to the process.

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- *artists and downtown planning*: artists have become very active in downtown planning. Their presence became increasingly important as the city began systematic efforts to improve the arts in the mid-1980s, with a one-percent budget line from city construction projects designated for public art.

Many artists lived and/or rented studio space in the poorer parts of downtown vulnerable to development pressures. They organized to oppose a third sports stadium and then brought together a broad coalition whose vision was built around environmental sustainability, affordable housing, and inclusive participation.

The Downtown Phoenix Arts Coalition spurred the formation of a larger Downtown Voices Coalition (DVC), whose members also included the Community Housing Partnership, Arizona Chain Reaction, the Phoenix Historic Neighborhoods Coalition, and LISC Phoenix (affiliated with the national Local Initiatives Support Corporation, the leading community development organization).

DVC's 2004 report, *Downtown Voices: Creating a Sustainable Downtown*, was open to the much broader framing of sustainable cities, which had progressed in many other cities by then. It clearly built upon the legacy of the participatory and multi-stakeholder process of the Phoenix Futures Forum, which persists in the DVC to the present day and serves as a counterweight to the pressures of the more traditional growth machine.

DVC itself, as well as community development groups such as [Chicanos Por La Causa](#), have led several affordable housing initiatives, and [LISC Phoenix](#) has developed a Sustainable Communities Initiative to link housing affordability to energy and transportation issues, the latter of which seems to be leading to considerably greater use of biking, walking, and public transport, especially among millennials. Chicanos Por La Causa also has a representative on the 15-member Citizens Transportation Commission which oversees the plan

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- *sustainable city planning*: recent city plan updates contain a full array of sustainable city components, from green building to complete streets, open space to healthy neighborhoods, urban forestry to farmers' markets.

For the first time, such planning had input from representatives of the neighborhood planning groups, which have grown quite steadily over the past three decades; the earlier 17-point Green City program had been assembled somewhat hastily with the help of ASU's Global Institute of Sustainability to take advantage of the political opportunity of stimulus funding under the Obama administrations American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA).

How current initiatives play out will depend on many factors in the civic, political, desert, and environmental justice landscapes of the city itself, the metropolitan area, and at state and national levels.

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