

Pinal County faces decisions on planning for growth

Morrison Institute study finds area needs to design own identity or remain suburb

By Sarah J. Boggan

EAST VALLEY TRIBUNE

<http://www.eastvalleytribune.com>

Pinal County has come to a fork in the road.

It can continue on a path of reacting to unprecedented growth or it can capitalize on a slower housing market and take the time to do some deliberate planning.

This is one of several decisions the county must make as outlined in "The Future at Pinal: Making Choices, Making Places," the culmination of a six-month study conducted by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University.

The report comes at a time when Pinal County is embarking on an update of its comprehensive plan — the county's blueprint for growth and development. With about 300,000 residents today, the county is set to outgrow Pima County soon, the report says. County officials say this is a good time to get ahead of the curve while the area's growth is finally starting to slow for the first time since 2004.

From 2000 to 2006 Pinal County's population grew by 67 percent, with a third of the population living in unincorporated areas. The county is on track to eclipse the 1 million population mark by 2037, the report says.

"The overwhelming decision is whether Pinal wants to be a place," said Grady Gammage Jr., a member of the Morrison Institute's research team. "It isn't going to happen by default; the county is going to have to take (a) positive step in that direction."

With a great deal of Pinal's growth coming from single-family home development, with a lack of large job centers or land set aside for jobs, the county is quickly becoming a "pass-through," but that can be stopped, Gammage said.

The report looked at the area's rural heritage and put forth goals for the future, with county leaders steering growth and development to prevent Pinal from becoming a bedroom community for the booming metro areas of Phoenix and Tucson. Half of the county's workforce already travels to those destinations for work, the report says.

"One of the things that was so startling was: Would we become a distinguishable destination or would we become a Mc Mega drive-through?" Pinal County Supervisor Sandie Smith said. "We really want to make sure we learn from the mistakes of others and ourselves, and improve upon them."

The report includes six "place-making" goals, such as creating an identity separate from Maricopa and Pima counties, protecting miles of desert and open land, providing choices for transportation and creating jobs.

"There's a real thirst out there for Pinal to have its own identity and to be something

different other than to be swallowed by Phoenix," Gammage said. "That was a stronger sentiment than we expected."

Gammage said that through interviewing more than 50 public- and private-sector leaders and hundreds of residents, it became clear Pinal County has an identity, but that could erode if action isn't taken to preserve it.

"In doing the report, it crystallized for the first time how Maricopa and Pima County turned out differently because of decisions made decades ago," Gammage said. "That decision hasn't been made yet in Pinal. (In Maricopa and Pima) the decisions were made by the biggest cities. In Pinal County there is no comparably dominant city, so the county may need to take on different roles."

The Pinal County Board of Supervisors commissioned the study for \$272,000.

See the report

What: Presentation of "The Future at Pinal: Making Choices, Making Places"

When: 9 a.m. today

Where: The Property, 1251 W. Gila Bend Highway, Casa Grande

Info: <http://www.morrisoninstitute.org>