

Pinal County now has a map to chart its future

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Pinal County - a teenager trying to find its way - deserves applause for aspiring to be something other than another Maricopa County or Pima County when it grows up.

In fact, the county took the initial step toward adulthood last year when the board of supervisors commissioned the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University to map out potential areas for employment hubs, educational institutions, recreation and open space, transportation corridors and compatible land uses.

That roadmap - *The Future at Pinal* - is complete. Now the county begins an arduous but essential journey into becoming more livable and sustainable, not just a bedroom community for its metropolitan neighbors to the north and south.

The next stop on this trip should be a big table where all Pinal stakeholders - county leaders, municipal mayors and council members, Indian community leaders, school district officials, business leaders and land owners - begin crafting a multifaceted blueprint that maps home, work, leisure and entertainment for the more than 1.3 million residents who are projected to be here by 2050.

Because much of the growth that took Pinal by storm two years ago exists on county land, parcels of which could eventually be annexed by a city or town, it is crucial that everyone be on the same planning page. And as much as Pinal prefers to flex its independent muscle as it grows, its discussions should not be limited to its county lines.

Pinal would not be in the position it is today if not for its affordable housing and for the jobs its residents hold in the Phoenix and Tucson areas where roadways undergo a daily beating.

Chandler, Gilbert, Mesa and Queen Creek experience the brunt of Pinal's runaway growth on its arterial streets, while Ahwatukee Foothills and Tempe feel the growing pains on Interstate 10, particularly at the infamous Broadway Curve.

Granted, the Southeast Valley has much work to do in terms of encouraging its own commuters to carpool, hop on the bus or telecommute whenever possible. So regardless of what Pinal decides to do, Maricopa County is far from solving its transportation woes.

But if Pinal chooses to explore commuter rail as one part of its regional transportation system, it should expand the discussion to leaders from Maricopa and Pima counties, which would also benefit from a rapid people mover.

The same goes for light rail, if Pinal so chooses to extend it into its borders. Building walkable communities and developing job centers in Pinal also would eliminate filthy air, clogged streets and weary workers. And that is only the tip of turning this region into a metropolitan area in and of itself.

The Morrison Institute had the daunting task of mapping *The Future at Pinal*. It is now Pinal that has the daunting yet exciting task of using that information to grow into a well-rounded county. Or adult, if you will.

Read *The Future at Pinal* at www.morrisoninstitute.org.