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J. Robert Havlick Award
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City of Casa Grande General Plan 2020
Community First

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The City of Casa Grande General Plan 2020 was approved by voters on November 3, 2009. The General Plan 2020, however, was not a traditional approach. General plan documents have conventionally taken a Euclidian, parcel-by-parcel view of determining land uses within a city, and often include upwards of 20 different land use categories. Alternatively, the City of Casa Grande's General Plan 2020 aimed to offer its citizens, staff, and developers a more flexible approach, and provides this direction by using only *six* different land use categories. This innovation has helped the

city shift the focus from density to quality, while at the same time ushering in Smart Growth principles and regulations by encouraging mixed-uses within the different land use categories. Further innovations in the General Plan 2020 include the creation of a Growth Areas Element that has become a tool for economic development by alerting prospective developers of the anticipated availability of infrastructure and support services. The Plan was further innovative in that it helped to solidify relations with neighboring communities. In preparation for the Plan, the City of Casa Grande signed intergovernmental agreements with each of its surrounding communities, thus setting the planning area boundaries for the City. Each of these innovations required great leaps of faith and creativity, but have produced a document that has greatly benefited the community. The City of Casa Grande General Plan 2020 truly puts the *Community First!*

Casa Grande is a dynamic community, a modern city with rural heritage and old-fashioned values. Its economic base is a mix of retail trade, factory outlet shopping, manufacturing and agriculture. Founded in 1879, Casa Grande was named for the famous Hohokam Indian ruins which are located 20 miles northeast of the city. Strategically located midway between Phoenix and Tucson, at the intersection of two interstate highways (I-8 and I-10), the city has grown to be the largest community in Pinal County. The city has experienced tremendous growth in the last decade. Although it took 120 years to build infrastructure and support its first 19,000 residents, Casa Grande had only 5 more years to be able to sustain an additional 19,000 residents. The city currently boasts a year-round population of approximately 46,000 residents, with an additional 10,000 long-term visitors during the winter months.

Prior to adopting the General Plan 2020, the city had operated under the General Plan 2010, which passed in 2001. Although the city is only required by Arizona state statutes to update the general plan every ten years, the city council felt a need to update the document early due to growth that had occurred within the city since the General Plan 2010 document was adopted. The General Plan 2010 document was no longer accurate at guiding growth, nor was it meeting its purpose of providing a future vision for the city.

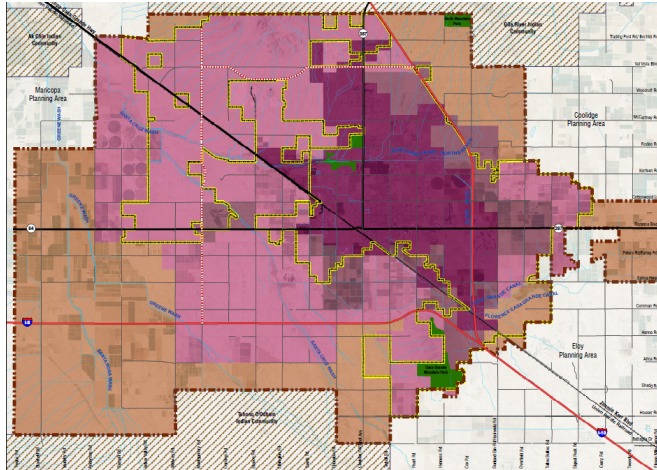


Before the General Plan 2020 replaced it, the General Plan 2010 was being amended over a

dozen times per year. With each amendment came additional public meetings, work sessions, development fees, increased staff workload, and costs associated with mailings and public notices that would not have been necessary under an appropriate plan.

Importance/Impact/Benefits

It is difficult to overstate the importance and impact of the three innovations of the General Plan 2020. First, the General Plan 2020 provides a strong vision for the future of the City of Casa Grande. Developers can focus on building quality improvements that help create the sense of place that the residents desire. The City of Casa Grande expects very few amendments to the General Plan 2020, because of the flexibility built into the land use categories. This saves valuable time and resources, and also assures citizens that their vision for the future is the vision that will be implemented. Secondly, the Growth Areas Element of the Plan is being used as an economic development tool, helping potential developers know the limits of existing infrastructure, and helping citizens



know where to expect future growth. And finally, because of the intergovernmental agreements that set limits to the city’s planning area, Casa Grande and each of its neighboring communities can make population and development projections and more effectively plan utility and transportation systems. These agreements also allow the cities to more adequately determine the possibilities for regional solutions to issues and problems. In the short time that has passed since its adoption, the Plan has already been recognized by the American Planning Association as Arizona’s “Best General Plan,” which is no doubt attributable to its many innovations and community-wide support.

Who has benefited from the innovation?

Three key groups of people benefited from the three innovations surrounding the General Plan 2020: the citizens, the development community, and government agencies. The citizens benefit from having a clear vision of the future, with a strong commitment to developing the “sense of place” that they asked for in the Plan. The Growth Areas Element gives the citizens guidance for where they can expect future development. The intergovernmental agreements protect the rights of individual land owners, while providing them with guidance as to which City jurisdiction their now unincorporated property will eventually belong.

The development community benefits from having more flexible standards, which allow them to build mixed-use projects (which lead to more walkable and sustainable communities). The developers will not have to ask for as many amendments, and are empowered with the ability to focus on creating quality developments instead of focusing on the rigid rules of previous general plan documents. Developers also benefit from the Growth Areas Element because they know the extents of current city infrastructure, and can thus plan future development according to these

locations. Lastly, developers benefit from the intergovernmental agreements, because they know ahead of time which jurisdiction their projects and master-planned communities will pertain to.

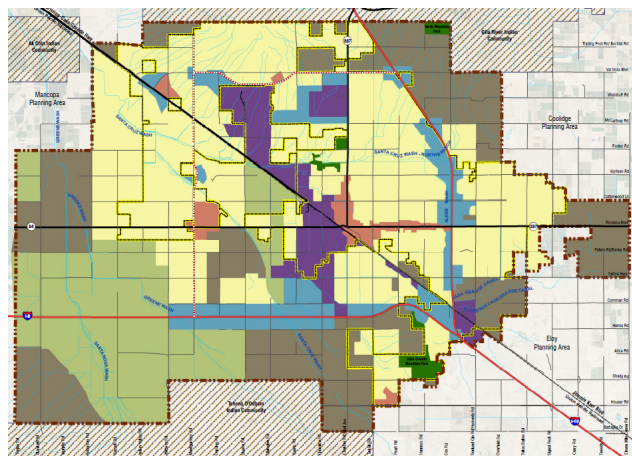
The city of organization benefits from the flexibility built into the general plan land use categories because there will be fewer amendments, thus freeing up valuable resources for other projects. The city also benefits from the Growth Areas Element because it provides a quick and easy guide to future development. Lastly, Casa Grande and its neighboring jurisdictions agencies have each benefited greatly from defining future jurisdictional boundaries through the intergovernmental agreements.

How was the innovation initiated and implemented?

Around the year 2000, Casa Grande began growing at a fast rate, and services needed to be expanded to reach the new areas of the city that were being annexed. The General Plan 2010 document was passed in 2001, but quickly became outdated and inadequate at guiding the development of the city. Neighboring jurisdictions, experiencing similar growth, were also dealing with the complexities of rapid expansion. The City of Casa Grande decided that these problems had to be addressed quickly. With help from their elected officials, staff from Casa Grande approached employees of the surrounding jurisdictions, and began to work out details of setting ultimate planning boundaries. After this was accomplished, Casa Grande employees began the general plan update process. Dozens of public meetings, hearings, charettes, open houses, and events were held in order to gather information and to understand the desires of the community. Because the residents desired a unique sense of place, urban amenities with a rural heritage, staff and the general plan consultant decided that the best way to create this sense of place would be to build great flexibility into the land use categories. This enabled the creation of categories with a mix of uses in the downtown area while protecting rural and agricultural uses in outlying areas.

What risks were associated with planning and developing the innovation?

The biggest risks of the innovations were the political ramifications of failure, as well as the potential to develop a concept, only to find it unattainable in the end. The political risks loomed large, especially as intergovernmental agreements were being hashed out to decide planning boundaries. Having one city disagree could have meant a failure to the project, and an inability to set boundaries prior to commencing the general plan update. One of the largest financial risks was that the city was paying a consultant to draft the general plan, and had to hold many out-of-scope meetings before being able to provide the consultant with the necessary vision to draft the plan. Had the city been unable to pull together the community's ideas, the innovative land use categories and Growth Areas Element would not have been created, and the city would have spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in vain.



What was the environment in which the innovation was created and sustained?

The innovations were each created and sustained in collaborative environments. Had city staff been unwilling to work alongside other jurisdictions, or if they had not gone out of their way to get opinions from all aspects of the general public, the General Plan 2020 would not have been successful as it has become. In this sense, teamwork and diversity truly created a better product.

What were execution costs and savings?

The consultant the city hired to draft the General Plan 2020 Update was paid \$270,000. The savings experienced from the newly-implemented plan will far outreach previous updates, as the Plan’s flexibility will reduce the need for the extra staff time, public hearings, city council meetings, and public notices that accompany general plan amendments. Furthermore, while it is difficult to measure, it is anticipated that the flexibility and friendly-nature of the Plan will also enable greater economic development. Since developers are no longer limited by rigid land use categories, the city also expects to see higher-quality projects being built as a result of the Plan. In terms of the agreements developed in anticipation of the general plan update process, the costs of the agreements were simply the time and labor resources. The agreements have, in turn, saved each of the municipalities from the possibility of expensive lawsuits related to annexation wars.

What lessons were learned that could be shared with other local governments?

One of the biggest problems the city faced under the General Plan 2010 was a rigid, time-specific plan that was inadequate for the city during its time of rapid growth. Perhaps one of its biggest shortcomings was that the 2010 plan did not address Smart Growth principles, and did nothing to protect the interests of all residents. The most important takeaways from the General Plan 2020 should be that flexibility is key in a general plan (or comprehensive plan) document, that working alongside jurisdictional neighbors can produce better products, and that incorporating diverse and extensive citizen input can truly lead to a better plan.

Which department and/or individuals championed the innovation?

The Planning and Development Department championed the General Plan 2020. Director Rick Miller and Senior Planner Leila DeMaree led the project from creation to implementation. The city council and the City Manager’s Office, including City Manager Jim Thompson, played a large role at ensuring the intergovernmental agreements for the planning area limits were signed with neighboring jurisdictions and also provided support and guidance throughout the creation of the General Plan 2020.

