



A MODEL FOR Sustainable Development in Arizona's Sun Corridor

© Victoria Collier

© Victoria Collier

Luther Propst

Emerging concerns about climate change impacts along with changing preferences for housing options are shaping the debate over growth patterns and sustainability. Climate modeling experts expect Arizona's Sun Corridor to become hotter, drier, and more prone to extreme weather events. In a region where summer temperatures top 110°, annual precipitation is only 9 to 10 inches, and flood events already can be extreme, adaptation to and mitigation of climate change impacts will be of paramount importance. The response will require significantly changing prevalent land use planning and development patterns in the region.

Developing a Plan for Superstition Vistas

A 275-square-mile swath of undeveloped land just east of the Phoenix metropolitan area presents one of the most extraordinary opportunities in the United States, if not the world, to create a model for sustainable community development (see figure 1). This land, known as Superstition Vistas, could

become home to nearly one million people over the next 50 years. Seldom has there been an opportunity to comprehensively envision and plan the future of a parcel this large, under single ownership, and in the path of one of the nation's fastest-growing cities.

Another unique feature of Superstition Vistas is its status as state trust land, a little-understood classification granted to states upon entry into the Union to generate revenues for the trust beneficiaries—primarily public schools (Culp, Laurenzi, and Tuell 2006). With this mandate, the Arizona State Land Department is in an ideal position to holistically plan the Superstition Vistas parcel and to exercise patience and prudence in selecting development opportunities that best generate value for the beneficiaries—and also for the greater public interest.

Superstition Vistas is in Pinal County, one of the nation's fastest-growing counties, and is near existing rail lines, a major transportation corridor, and an airport. It adjoins the Superstition Mountains, one of Arizona's iconic landscapes. It is also located prominently within the emerging mega-

region linking Phoenix and Tucson, often called the Sun Corridor, which is comprised of multiple jurisdictions that have an interdependent economic and planning future.

As these jurisdictions grapple with challenges brought by growth pressures and the increasing connectedness of the region, Superstition Vistas has the potential to play an important role in regional infrastructure, transportation policy and open space networks. Its strategic location makes the area a potential linchpin in shaping development patterns and shifting the *laissez faire*, business-as-usual model for new communities in the region.

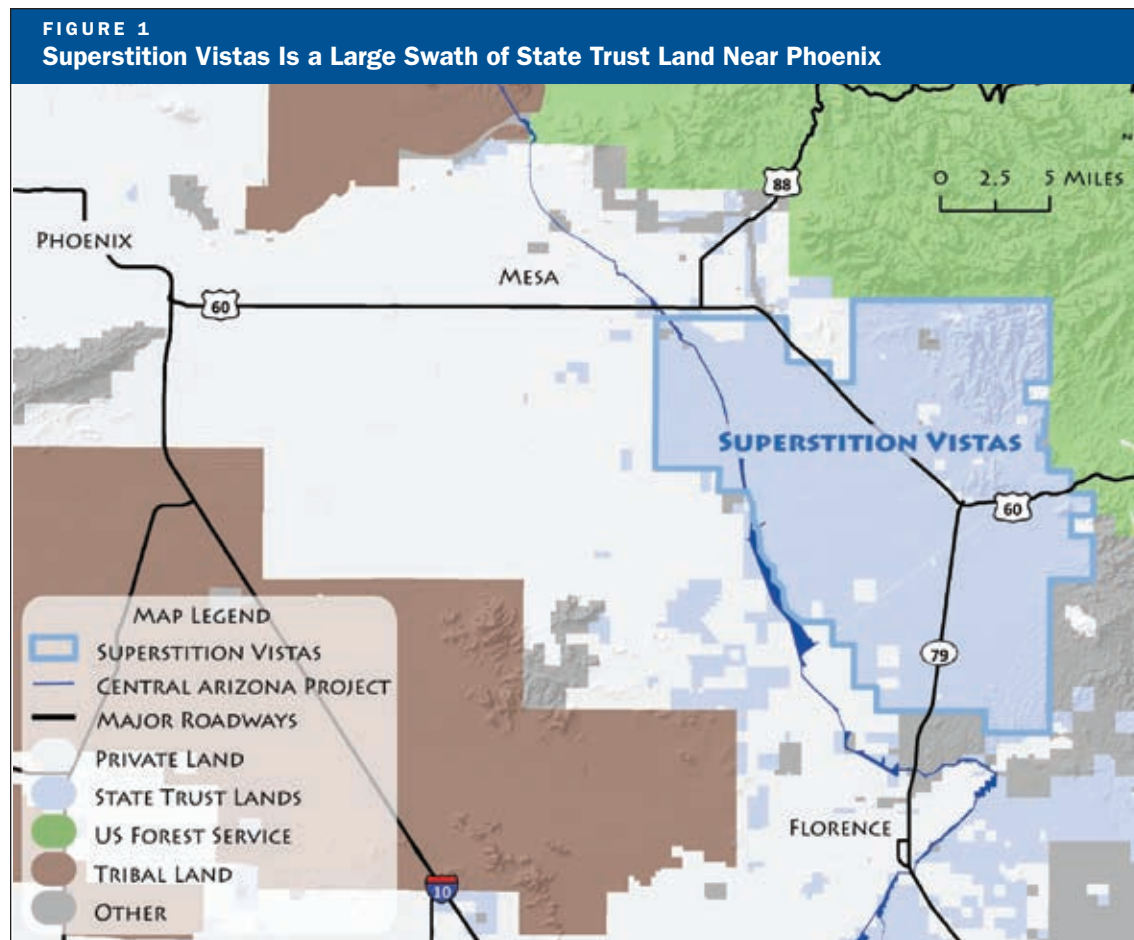
This unique land's potential has captured the imagination of business and civic leaders, planning professionals, smart growth advocates, academic institutions and nonprofit think tanks. These stakeholders have formed the Superstition Vistas Steering Committee, a voluntary partnership dedicated to exploring how the land could become a global model for sustainable development in the twenty-first century. The committee has raised nearly \$2 million and has hired Robert Grow, the chief architect of Envision Utah, to lead a visioning

and scenario-planning process that considers land use, infrastructure, transportation, sustainability, economic prosperity, and the financial return for the state trust.

As a member of the Steering Committee, the Lincoln Institute-Sonoran Institute Joint Venture is advancing the environmental sustainability components of the scenario planning effort with Grow and his consulting team, which includes prominent organizations such as Fregonese & Associates, ED&A/AECOM, Robert Charles Lesser Co., and the Rocky Mountain Institute. The resulting model—addressing key environmental indicators such as greenhouse gases, air pollution, water use, energy use, landfill waste, stormwater runoff, and heat-island effects—will help decision makers understand the relationship between urban form and environmental sustainability.

Changing Expectations about Housing and Urban Form

Land in the Phoenix area is being consumed faster than the population is growing, and a significant amount of this land consumption is due to the



Source: Sonoran Institute (www.Sonoran.org)

prevalence of auto-dependent, large-lot subdivisions. However, changing demographics are shrinking the market for large homes on the urban fringe. As retiring baby-boomers seek new housing options, demand is increasing for walkable, transit-oriented, mixed-use developments closer to urban cores. Growing recognition of climate change impacts is also increasing interest in sustainable developments that incorporate green building principles.

Most of the housing needed to support the projected population growth in the Phoenix area has not yet been built. While infill and redevelopment can and should accommodate much of this growth, it is likely that development will continue at the urban fringe—in areas like the Superstition Vistas. For Arizona and the Sun Corridor communities to limit greenhouse gas emissions, boost resiliency to future climate conditions, and meet the changing needs of residents, current development patterns must be altered soon and significantly.

Fundamental challenges exist in using the Superstition Vistas as a model for reinventing the pattern and form of development in the Sun Corridor. As a public agency with an intergenerational mandate to raise money for public schools, the Arizona State Land Department is required by law to maximize the value of its assets for the beneficiaries. Despite pressure to auction state trust land

parcels piecemeal to the highest bidder, there is a growing understanding that, given a 50-year planning horizon and real estate market trends, incorporating strong sustainability elements could prove highly marketable over the long term.

Sun Corridor developers generally are not yet building housing that responds to changing market conditions and rising interest in smart growth styles. This is especially true of the national homebuilding corporations that dominate residential construction in the Phoenix market. With a few notable exceptions, industry leaders in Arizona remain resistant to new business models. Furthermore, planning and zoning policies in the region still favor single-use development patterns that mandate automobile dependency, strict segregation of residential and commercial uses, and low density residential building.

Regional planning efforts are also limited. Apart from transportation planning in Maricopa County, planning and cooperation around land use, multimodal transportation, and other infrastructure at the regional scale is in its infancy. To fully realize the Superstition Vistas potential, the planning and visioning process must be sensitive to the traditional Western culture of local control and attentive to local interests, as well as to the roles of the counties and the state.

Yet there is reason to be optimistic about meeting the goals for Superstition Vistas. New leadership is promoting a fresh path for community development in the Sun Corridor. Arizona Governor Janet Napolitano convened a Growth Cabinet in 2006 to coordinate agency actions and to collaborate with cities, towns, and tribal communities to create a smart growth and development process that integrates land and water planning, and coordinates state infrastructure planning and development. Now the governor is spearheading a statewide initiative for the November 2008 ballot that will, if passed, provide funding for a commuter rail line between Tucson and Phoenix along a proposed route through the heart of Superstition Vistas.

Diverse interests are also promoting a constitutional amendment to reform the management of state trust lands by requiring more cooperative planning between the State Land Department and local governments, allowing the department to capture revenues to fund its planning, and permitting nonmonetary considerations when appraising the value of trust land. The latter provision will give the department more flexibility in planning

Focus on Climate Change

As part of its expanding focus on the interrelationships between climate change and land use, the Lincoln Institute is engaged in a variety of educational and research projects that address these issues. In April the Institute convened nearly 50 journalists for a professional development forum on cities and climate change in partnership with Harvard University's Nieman Foundation for Journalism and the Graduate School of Design.

The Superstition Vistas project was presented to this group as a key element of the Lincoln Institute-Sonoran Institute Joint Venture, which was created in 2003 to pursue projects that advance their shared interests related to land conservation and urban form in the West. The Lincoln Institute's Department of Planning and Urban Form and the Sonoran Institute's Growth Policy Program offer education and training programs to promote land use and development practices in the West that conserve land, minimize impacts to the natural environment, and use best practices in community planning and design.



Photo © Victoria Collier

The desert landscape of the Superstition Vistas offers an opportunity for sustainable development to accommodate Arizona's rapidly growing population.

and developing state trust lands and in considering open space, infrastructure investment, and other forms of contributory value.

As the climate and demographic patterns continue to change, automobile-dependent developments with large carbon footprints, which are the norm throughout the Sun Corridor, will not be as desirable as other options. The State Land Department can take advantage of “patient capital” in evaluating proposals and development patterns, choosing those that will be successful over time as conditions and market needs change. The agency can capitalize on the great potential of the Superstition Vistas to generate revenues for trust beneficiaries, while enriching the greater Sun Corridor community by creating a model for sustainable smart growth.

A grand vision for the Superstition Vistas is well within reach. It embodies one of the best opportunities on the planet to demonstrate that planning and developing energy efficient, sustainable communities is possible, profitable, and marketable. Such sustainable developments can counter the negative impacts of climate change, create vibrant, resilient, and safe communities, and offer residents a high quality of life. Achieving these goals at the Superstition Vistas project will give the world a model for a better future. **L**



Photo © Victoria Collier

▶ ABOUT THE AUTHOR

LUTHER PROPST is the executive director of the Sonoran Institute based in Tucson, Arizona. He earned his law degree and masters of regional planning degree from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Contact: luther@sonoran.org

▶ REFERENCE

Culp, Peter, Andy Laurenzi, and Cynthia C. Tuell. 2006. *State trust lands in the West: Fiduciary duty in a changing landscape*. Cambridge, MA: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy.