

A bold, new identity

Dec. 10, 2006 12:00 AM, *Arizona Republic*
Editorial

Close your eyes. Picture the ugly riverbed of the Agua Fria as a watercourse of parks, trails, athletic fields, maybe a golf course or two. Picture shimmering lakes, picnic areas, equestrian trails, improved habitats for vegetation, birds and animals, and riverbank development.

It's a bold vision and it's beginning to take shape in the West Valley - but at about the pace of a desert tortoise.

Visionary projects like this take time, but they can be done. Take a look around the Valley:

- The Phoenix Mountain Preserves, a wild and untamed refuge in the midst of an urban metropolis, took decades to create.
- The Indian Bend Wash, a greenbelt of trails, athletic fields and lakes that meanders through Scottsdale, also required many years of work.
- The Rio Salado Project in the riverbed of the Salt River was first proposed in the 1960s. It now graces Tempe. And a portion of the Salt riverbed through Phoenix is well on its way to restoration with new wildlife habitats and trails.

Nearly a decade ago, developer John F. Long began talking about transforming the 30-plus miles of urban eyesore along the Agua Fria into a recreation corridor. There was immediate excitement. But today, there remains a long way to go.

New definition for West Valley

A recreation corridor stretching from Waddell Dam south to the confluence of the Gila River has the potential to define the West Valley in new and exciting ways. Fueling interest in the project is the area's tremendous growth. Former bedroom communities like Avondale, Peoria, Goodyear, Surprise, Buckeye and Glendale are booming, and their residents need more open space.

A recent survey by Valley Forward, a civic group that seeks a balance between economic development and environmental quality, found that 61 percent of Maricopa County residents do not believe enough land has been dedicated to open space and recreation. The Agua Fria project would help meet those needs for more space.

Avondale Mayor Marie Lopez Rogers is well aware of the project's potential, so much so that she doesn't want to wait decades for its completion.

Unfortunately, there is no great sense of urgency elsewhere to get the project moving. Publicity has been sparse. Though Avondale has started work on a 2-mile trail, few amenities grace the length of the project. The sand-and-gravel operations that stretch along the Agua Fria River create a scene far removed from the futuristic renderings of a channel boasting high-end development and recreational uses on its banks.

Some progress has been made, however. An important milestone was reached in 2001 with the Agua Fria Watercourse Master Plan, a task led by the Flood Control District of Maricopa County, in partnership with cities and regional agencies. It's a good road map that spells out types of uses to turn the waterway into a landmark recreation corridor.

Landowners must join the party

Crucial to the success of the project is the continued cooperation between supporters and the sand-and gravel-operators, which mine 53 million tons of aggregate in the Agua Fria each year. It's proposed that the mining companies would dig no more than an average of 10 to 12 feet in the flood channel, effectively channeling the river. This would lower the natural course of river and pull the adjacent lands out of the flood plain. Deep pits already mined along the river's channel would be reclaimed.

The hope is that channelization of the 32 miles can be accomplished in about eight years - an optimistic time frame given the fact no operator has yet stepped forward to be the first.

Rusty Bowers, executive director of the Arizona Rock Products Association, says the template of operators channeling the corridor and then moving to higher adjacent lands "can work." A key component is the eventual formation of a special district of landowners under the auspices of the county supervisors.

No timetable has been set, and Bowers believes that the district may need taxing authority if work on the project is to speed up. That strikes us as reasonable because it's the landowners who stand to profit through increased commercial and/or residential development along the banks of the Agua Fria.

The estimated price tag of the project - \$115 million to \$148 million - is steep. Cost-sharing strategies between private development and public funding likely will be necessary if the vision is to be realized. Moreover, only one city - Peoria - has approved the Watercourse Master Plan.

Other cities must adopt it or there will be further delays in implementation.

Close your eyes again. Picture for a moment a Valley in 2030 ringed by a wide belt of green and desert vegetation - Indian Bend Wash, Rio Salado and the Agua Fria corridor. It could be the grand identity across jurisdictions that we now lack.

Let's make it happen.