

VALLEY & STATE

URBAN SPRAWL



The transformation of the Santa Fe Freight Depot into the Maricopa County Assessor's Office helped revitalize the corner of Fifth Avenue and Jackson Street in Phoenix. Similar projects that focus on reuse have taken hold across the Valley. CARLOS CHAVEZ/THE REPUBLIC

Renewing aging properties

Projects reuse resources to help develop Valley areas while easing expansion

By Weldon B. Johnson
The Arizona Republic

In Chandler, worn conveyor belts, recycled tires and chunks of city sidewalk helped turn a landfill into a city park.

In Phoenix, the old equipment mezzanine at the Santa Fe Freight Depot became the centerpiece for the headquarters of the Maricopa County Assessor's Office.

And in Mesa, streets that used to flood were

turned into arroyos that guide water away from Arizona State University's Polytechnic campus, helping to complete its rebirth from an Air Force base into a college campus.

Throughout the Valley, cities and corporations have been transforming property that seemed outdated or unusable, helping fight sprawl, preserve neighborhoods and showcase environmental innovations.

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Innovation

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Partly because of continuing economic difficulties, many communities are taking a long look at projects that make the best use of existing resources. They're rethinking the idea that the Valley should continue expanding into the desert.

"I think our last economic crunch demonstrated that model might not be the best way and most sustainable way to grow our community," said Diane Brossart, president of Valley Forward Association.

"We need to start looking at infill development, the urban cores and increasing density so we have lots of opportunities for people to live, work and play in one area, so they're not sprawling and we don't have to build infrastructure on the edges of the city to support development. First let's look inward," she said.

Many of the projects have earned recognition from Valley Forward in its annual Environmental Excellence Awards. The group brings business and civic leaders together to improve the livability of local communities.

"It's not a new idea, but it's starting to gain traction," Brossart said. "We have been in the Valley for 42 years, and we have been pounding that drum for higher densities, for more mixed-use development, for adaptive reuse, for all the things we call smart growth strategies. It hasn't always been popular, but I do see it starting to shift. That's good news for all of us."

Innovative efforts

In Chandler, the city used 1,500 discarded rubber tires, 200 feet of worn conveyor belt, chunks of old city sidewalk and 478,000 tons of soil to transform a landfill into the Paseo Vista Recreation Area, the Valley's first city park built on a landfill.

The tires and conveyor belts formed the safety backstop in an archery range and provided retaining walls in a play area. The chunks of sidewalk also were used for retaining walls. The park was completed in 2009 and funded through the sale of general-obligation bonds approved by Chandler voters.

In downtown Phoenix, Valley Forward credited the revitalization of the Santa Fe Freight Depot for bringing life back to the corner of Fifth Avenue and Jackson Street.

But the renovation wasn't done just for nostalgia: The move saved Maricopa County money. The 82-year-old depot, which had been inactive for 50 years, made it possible for the Assessor's Office to consolidate some of its operations into a more cost-efficient location.

Bringing the building up to current standards meant removing toxic materials such as mercury, lead and asbestos. But much of the original character of the building was retained. Construction cost about \$1.9 million, and the total project, which included relocating about 70 people and shutting down former leased office space, cost almost \$4 million. But that was well worth it, said Dick Carr, capital facilities man-

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DIANE BROSSART

President of the Valley Forward Association

ager for Maricopa County.

"That's a bargain by today's standards to get a building of that quality," Carr said. "In projecting out the cost of what we did and the savings, the building will almost pay for itself in five years. ... Not only that, but we're saving a ton of energy, too. It's a plus-plus kind of project."

Such success has the county looking into revamping other older buildings.

"They're stronger than some of the new ones," Carr said. "They've lasted this long. For instance with the Santa Fe building, we had engineers look at it for structure, stability and things like that. It would even qualify as taking the earthquake quotients, that's how solid it is."

Trees replace pavement

At the ASU Polytechnic campus in Mesa, the arroyos not only solve storm-water problems but help students and faculty connect with nature. Streets were replaced with desert trees, shrubs and cactuses that help retain water and keep temperatures cooler.

The project also used recycled materials, including concrete and river rock, which were combined with drought-tolerant plants to transform the atmosphere of the old military base into one more

suitable for students.

In Tempe, when the Vestar Development Co. was looking to build a shopping center in the East Valley, the intersection of Loop 202 and Loop 101 was a natural choice.

"That intersection is the third-highest-trafficked intersection in the state of Arizona," said David Malin, Vestar acquisition and development director.

But while the site was ideal from a business standpoint, it required a tremendous amount of work just to get it ready for construction. The 130 acres contained a collection of landfills, junkyards and a foundry. In cleaning up the site, construction crews found debris from a renovation of nearby Sun Devil Stadium, old water tanks and vehicles. The \$285 million project turned out to be the largest brown-field cleanup in Arizona history.

"That piece of property is kind of the front door to the entire city," Malin said. "And, frankly, it was nothing but urban blight. It was nothing but a headache for police and fire. Really, it was just an eyesore for a thriving city."

Saving a library

In some cases, revitalizing one building can help preserve an en-

tire neighborhood.

When Phoenix needed to replace the Harmon Library near Buckeye Road and Seventh Avenue, it seemed like a simple task. The existing library was next to Harmon Park, so the plan was to build the new structure on the opposite side of the park and tear the old building down.

But that would have left a hole in the neighborhood.

"The library had become a wonderful sort of community venue," said Ed Lebow, director of the Phoenix Public Art Program. "Outside of the library there was a lovely community garden where gardeners would come and grow vegetables and other things. Because the site was flip-flopping, it didn't include the kind of room we thought gardeners could use."

Using the city's percent-for-public-art ordinance, which stipulates that up to 1 percent of the cost of capital projects be dedicated to art, the project was designed not only to retain the community garden but to add other features beneficial to the neighborhood. The new Harmon Park incorporates more shade trees and a small amphitheater for community programming or classes.

"Typically, when people think of public art, they think of sculptures standing in front of buildings. But in Phoenix it has meant something different, it has meant designing better urban spaces, better trails and better parks. Doing exactly this type of in-between improvement can be very vital to the comfort of people using these facilities," Lebow said.