

Voters say "yes" to General Plan

*By Jonathan Clark
Nogales International*

Once again, Nogales is a city with a plan.

After nearly a decade of non-compliance with a state law, city voters on Tuesday overwhelmingly approved a new General Plan.

With all precincts reported and counted, unofficial tallies from the County Elections Office showed 71 percent of voters casting a “yes” vote for the 10-year plan.

“This community hasn’t been able to enter into this next chapter for quite some time,” City Manager Shane Dille said of the outcome. “It’s going to be nice to have a community in compliance with state requirements.”

A statute called Growing Smarter, passed by the Arizona Legislature in 1998, mandates that cities and counties update their General Plan every 10 years, and that they include public participation in the process. But the City of Nogales has been out of compliance ever since voters rejected the last proposal in 2002.

Now with a new General Plan set to be put in place, the city is also in a better position to attract new development and investment, Dille said.

“It’s probably the first contact piece that developers look at,” he said. “Investors that want to consider a community, developers that want to consider a community, probably before they ever talk to a community leader, they’ve already got their hands on that community’s General Plan and taken a look at the vision of the community.”

A General Plan is just that – general, Dille said. It doesn’t mean any radical changes or lay out strict rules, but instead offers guidelines for the city going forward.

“For us here locally, as land use zoning changes, we now have a general plan in place that has a land use component to it and circulation component to it, so as staff and a community, we’re guided in terms of what we ought to be changing our zoning to,” he said.

“When you adopt a general plan, it doesn’t change the underlying zoning of anything, it basically just says, if you are going to change the zoning, what should that zoning be?”

Some critics of the plan had complained that it was too general. Local developer Jim Barr told the NI in a pre-election interview that the plan didn’t address issues like flooding, aging sewer pipes and the International Outfall Interceptor in specific-enough terms. But Dille said that generality is in the eye of the beholder.

“Undoubtedly you’re going to have some that say that the plan is too general, but you’ll have others who say that generality provides greater flexibility,” he said.

Turnout for Tuesday’s special election was low – only 8.2 percent of the 9,360 eligible voters cast ballots. Dille attributed that number to factors including voter apathy, people’s busy lives, and the fact

that the issue was not especially contentious. Even Barr, one of the more outspoken critics of the measure, said he would vote on it if he could (he lives outside city limits), telling the NI that “it’s better to have a poor plan than no plan.”

Despite the low turnout, Dille said the wide margin of victory for the ballot measure, known as Proposition 401, sent a clear message.

“It shows overwhelming support for the vision that’s represented in that document,” he said, “and that allows the council and staff to move forward in confidence, knowing that the voters who turned out to vote on this thing were so overwhelmingly in support.”

Next step

The next step for Proposition 401 is for the mayor and council to formally canvass the vote, which they are expected to do at their June 1 regular meeting. They unanimously approved the General Plan proposal at a Dec. 8, 2010 meeting, setting the stage for Tuesday’s election.

The plan was developed by a firm called The Planning Center, which won a \$181,625 contract from the city. As part of the public input process, stakeholders were invited to a week-long, after-hours meeting, and the city also held a public forum on the plan and made copies available for review and comment at the Nogales City Hall, the Nogales Rochlin Public Library, and the Planning and Zoning Department.

County Elections Director Melinda Meek said Thursday she hadn’t received all the invoices yet for conducting the election and couldn’t immediately provide a total price tag. But she said the limited scale of the vote – only five polling places were used – would like keep costs in the \$15,000-\$20,000 range.

The plan

You can view the General Plan in its entirety at www.azplanningcenter.com/Nogales/, but here’s an excerpted overview from the executive summary:

This General Plan takes into consideration Nogales’ entrepreneurial spirit, the City’s strategic location on a bi-national economy, and the City’s ongoing relationship with the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) to:

1. Solidify the City’s position as a premier center for commerce and international trade in the Canada/Mexico (CANAMEX) corridor;
2. Use the railroad to the City’s benefit for ancillary industry and border trade;
3. Revitalize downtown as an attractive, mixed-use historic urban core that capitalizes on the Dennis DeConcini and the Morley Gate ports of entry;
4. Take full competitive advantage of the Mariposa Port of Entry;
5. Create the employment and retail base needed to secure the long-term fiscal vitality of the City;
6. Provide a safe and efficient multimodal transportation system that includes fully integrated ports of entry, vehicular, transit, pedestrian and bicycle modes;

7. Conserve significant natural resources and open spaces while taking full advantage of eco-tourism opportunities;
8. Support the phased infrastructure expansion and updates required to serve the existing and anticipated growth of the City and its floating population of 55,000;
9. Promote the public and private construction of timely and financially sound infrastructure expansion through the use of infrastructure funding and financial planning that is coordinated with development activity; and
10. Identify, pursue and secure grants and other funding sources to successfully implement this General Plan.