

Today everyone is focused on the current recession and the rapidly changing economic atmosphere. Our attention is often diverted to survival techniques rather than forward thinking. As those of us who have been down this path before know, this too will pass. Our challenge is to use the time to identify and evaluate future planning issues and trends. The silver lining of this recession is the breathing room it gives us to assess and plan for those issues.

“More than ever, regional efforts must be coordinated and strategic alliances formed to help the metropolitan area emerge poised to address the future challenges.”

More than ever, regional efforts must be coordinated and strategic alliances formed to help the metropolitan area emerge poised to address the future challenges. We have the opportunity to streamline development processes, coordinate land use planning between jurisdictions, adapt codes and regulations to address future housing and transportation needs and prepare to accommodate denser infill development of the future.

When the housing market re-emerges it won't be the same market we are used to. Buyers will demand smaller homes on smaller lots within reasonable distance of necessary services. This will be accomplished on the fringes through well designed master planned communities and within the current urban areas (with or without Rio Nuevo) through sensitive and thoughtful infill development. Alternate transportation modes and recreational opportunities will be of primary importance. Homebuyers will be more discriminating and will demand full value for their investment.

At the same time, more value will be placed on preserving and enhancing our unique lifestyle. Environmental concerns and water adequacy will remain in the forefront of our community issues. Land use decisions must also be directed to providing the best economic development opportunities for future employment needs. Land use policies and codes must be redesigned to address public policy objectives in these areas.

Another area of enormous importance is the changing demographics facing our community. During the recent housing frenzy there was much discussion about the pent-up demand that drove the market. There is another pent-up demand currently growing associated with the soon-to-retire baby boomers. The 65 year old and over population is projected to double to 69 million by 2030. Various projections have been made regarding the staggering number of future retirees who wish to relocate in the sunbelt and more specifically in the Tucson region. Those relocations have been delayed due to the current housing market. Individuals wishing to relocate are stymied by the inability to sell their current homes. When the market recovers we need to be prepared for the influx of that generation.

The Boomers will not only require housing in a wide range of options, but they will also require services associated with their new lifestyles, including recreational opportunities and access to health care. We need to make provisions for these in our land use planning and regulations. This includes the emphasis that is currently being given to a great variety of senior living options, especially Continuous Care Retirement Communities (CCRCs) throughout the region (See the November 08 TREND Report, Aging Population Demands High Density Living by Linda Morales). Most importantly, we need to take steps to integrate these future residents in the community, not isolate them in separate and secluded communities.

Local jurisdictions are using these slower times to review and update some of their codes and regulations. Pima County has recently improved parking standards for commercial developments and is working on updating the other parking requirements for other land uses. The City of Tucson has revised some sections of the Land Use Code (not necessarily for the better) and has engaged a national consultant to reformat the LUC. They also have revised sections of the landscape requirements and incorporated water harvesting, grey water and solar elements in the code and are currently looking at revisions to the parking standards.

“Various projections have been made regarding the staggering number of future retirees who wish to relocate in the sunbelt and more specifically in the Tucson region.”

This is the time to look at these regulations in the larger context of regional policies and land use planning. However, piecemeal adjustments to the regulations often result in disjointed and contradictory regulations that just raise the frustration level of those using the codes. Everyone with an interest in the future of the greater Tucson community needs to become engaged in these processes in a positive manner so as to take advantage of the current downturn to ensure a smooth, positive upturn.

Mike Grassinger is a Principal and Chief Executive Officer with The Planning Center since 1989. Mike specializes in working on land development and management with the real estate and development communities as well as with the City of Tucson planning department. He can be reached at (520) 623.6146 or via email at mgrassinger@azplanningcenter.com

