

Pima County's SWIP May Set Precedent for Valley

In December, 2006, the Pima County Board of Supervisors directed County staff to begin a study of the Southwest region of Pima County. This study, called the Southwest Infrastructure Plan (SWIP) was requested to better plan for the anticipated growth in densities and infrastructure for seventy square miles of land located within the seven mile by twelve mile rectangular region generally bounded by Tucson Mountain Park to the north, Mission Road to the east, the Tohono O'odham Nation – San Xavier District and Pascua Yaqui Tribe lands to the south, and Sandario Road to the west. Ryan Airfield, a component of the Tucson Airport Authority, is contained within the boundaries of the study.

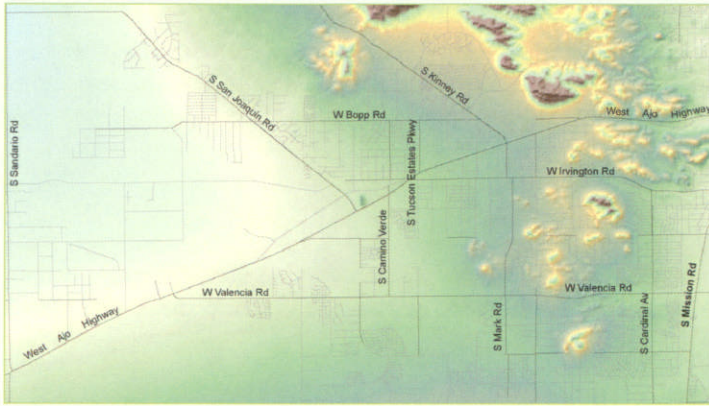


Image: Southwest infrastructure boundary map.

The purpose of SWIP is to provide a snapshot of existing conditions, an inventory of current and proposed infrastructure, opportunities for sustainable practices, and a forecast of future land needs. Pima County sees this area as a satellite community consisting of the 14,000 existing homes (mostly in the eastern area) and up to 40,000 additional new homes in planned communities, mostly in the western section of the planning area. It is hoped that Ryan Airfield and new industrial and commercial areas near Valencia Road and Ajo way will create a new hub for employment in the area.

One of the factors creating the urgency for this plan was the Board of Supervisors approval of some major comprehensive plan amendments in December of last year. There were three comprehensive plan amendment requests by private developers in the vicinity of Ryan Field totaling more than 1,500 acres. Another major amendment of 7,600 acres was initiated by Pima County planning staff. Two master planned communities, with primarily residential uses and support commercial, were among these amendments. Pima County hopes to encourage employment within walking, riding, or short driving distance for the more than 150,000 residents who will eventually live there.

Developers have worked closely with Pima County, Tucson Regional Economic Opportunities (TREO), and the University of Arizona to identify future employers who may locate in the planning area. This cooperative arrangement has been strongly supported by private developers and the County, as both parties understand the importance of new employment opportunities in this growth area.

In the SWIP, Pima County reconfirmed that the southwest region is a

potential strategic growth area. The region was excluded from the Sonoran Desert Protection Plan, which had the support of environmentalists, developers, and residents. The area has become a target for future growth because of the lack of sensitive habitat and traditional desert flora. However, the planning area currently has existing infrastructure deficiencies and will have infrastructure needs to accommodate for the newly planned and projected growth. The SWIP examined the nature, phasing, financial impacts, and funding possibilities for flood control, parks and recreation, transportation, wastewater infrastructure and other improvements that would meet the needs of this existing deficiencies and this future growth, while incorporating Smart Growth policies. These needs were studied and itemized as to their extent and probable cost.

A funding model, based on the principal of "growth pays for growth", was developed to establish the incremental costs of infrastructure needed to support the proposed growth and identify financing alternatives to cover those costs. In addition, funding alternatives including new funding mechanisms, along with traditional ones, are currently being identified by Pima County and the developers to fund the needs of this area. As the economy changes and demand changes, the SWIP will become a template for the fluid market to determine infrastructure demands and projections.

Pima County is conducting a separate but related study of funding methods, which will include impact fees for some, but not all, of the infrastructure categories. Impact fee rates will be determined in that study and considered by the County Board of Supervisors as required by State statutes. The County staff clearly understands that total development fees must not escalate to a point where affordability of housing becomes a major issue.

The SWIP is a new approach to infrastructure planning and financing. Its success may well be a blueprint for tackling future planning and growth issues county-wide. Pima County and the private developers directly affected by the SWIP will continue to work together to determine short term and long term infrastructure demands and identify methods to fund those needs. Clearly, the challenge to all parties is to move growth down a path of "paying its way", while keeping housing affordable and providing the necessary improvements to infrastructure to enhance and maintain our wonderful lifestyle in Tucson and Pima County.

Editor's Note:

Linda Morales was assisted with this article by Dave Larson of Montecito Companies and Kevin Tomkiel of Pomegranate Development, who are both working on significant projects in the SWIP area.

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