

From the Atlantic Citylab

Phoenix's Walkability Gamble Might Actually Pay Off

The Reinvent PHX initiative will try to guide transit-oriented development in five districts along the new light rail corridor.

ERIC JAFFE, Apr 2, 2013

Phoenix may never shake its reputation as an [unsustainable city](#), but that isn't going to stop it from trying. In 2011, the Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded the city a [\\$2.9 million Sustainable Communities grant](#) for a project called [Reinvent PHX](#) — a community-based planning effort to guide transit-oriented development in five districts along the new light rail corridor. That's not enough money to reverse decades of sprawl, of course, but it is enough to give each district an action plan for promoting walkable, mixed-use neighborhoods.

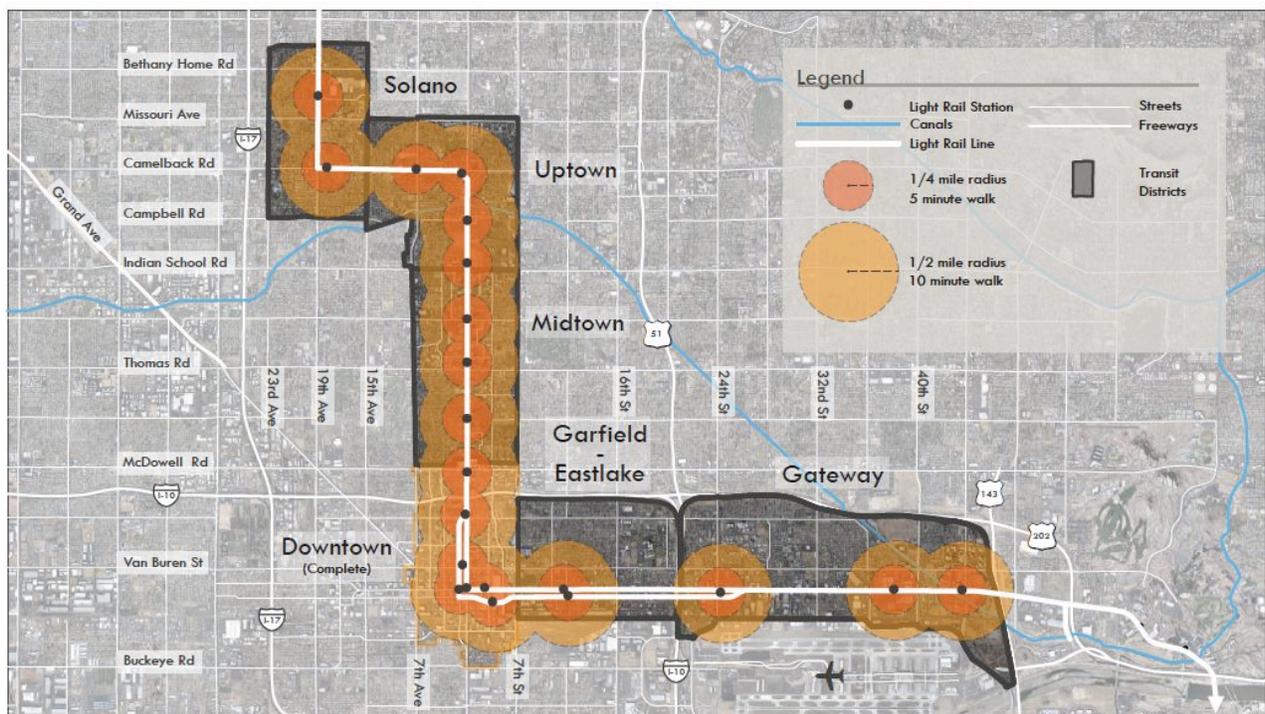
"What was really the catalyst for thinking and pushing for a greater focus on transit-oriented development obviously was we started operations of our light rail line in 2008," says Curt Upton from the city's planning department, who's part of the Reinvent PHX management team. "We definitely wanted to take advantage of that new infrastructure."

The program comes as city officials recognize the need to shift away from the sprawl that's defined the metro area for half a century. Planners know that a general lack of mobility is making transportation costs unaffordable. A report released last fall [[PDF](#)] showed that moderate-income families in the metro area devoted 62 percent of their income to housing and transportation (31 percent each) — eighth worst among major U.S. metros, and well above the [affordability threshold](#) established by experts.

Beyond that, says Upton, the city understands that people want more diverse housing options than they once did.

"Those two things — providing neighborhood choices and transportation choices, and neighborhood choices that allow you to reduce transportation costs — are really essential for the success of Phoenix," he says. "From an economic development perspective, the stakes are pretty high for us to make sure that we're a livable city and we're an attractive city going forward."

Reinvent PHX will chase down that goal in three phases. Officials will first work with community members from the five light rail districts to establish a unique vision for that neighborhood. That effort will be followed by a design phase that introduces potential changes in infrastructure and land use. The last step, says Upton, will involve finding the funds to implement these designs and rewriting municipal codes and regulations to facilitate the development.



The challenges of implementing a strong livability program in a city with such a rich history of sprawl are considerable.

Project leaders have made it a priority to work closely with the communities to make sure each TOD action plan matches the character of the neighborhood. So far this interaction has mostly involved public forums and what Upton calls "visioning workshops" held in partnership with local churches, PTAs, and neighborhood associations. Moving forward, officials plan to maintain long-term civic engagement by forming local committees within each district.

So far that process has worked well in the Gateway district, toward the eastern end of the light rail corridor, says Upton. Community members have identified public spaces that might be transformed into urban amenities like recreational parks — in particular, part of the Phoenix canal system that links into a light rail station. They've also stressed a desire for policies to limit gentrification as development advances in the low-income district.

"We want to encourage growth but we also want to make sure to not displace people," says Upton. "So affordable housing investment will be important in that particular area."

The challenges of implementing a strong livability program in a city with such a rich history of sprawl are considerable. The basic street infrastructure for walkability just isn't there, says Upton, and convincing lenders and developers to move beyond the parking requirements that typically inform their decisions. At the same time, he says, the city's prevalence of vacant lots present an opportunity for higher-density development without having to tear down existing buildings.

For guidance, Reinvent PHX leaders have looked to the Denver's successful TOD campaign, as well as San Diego's ability to repurpose — as opposed to demolish and

redevelop — existing buildings. Project officials are also working closely with a number of knowledgeable partners, including planners from [Arizona State University](#) and the St. Luke's Health Initiative, a health policy organization based in Phoenix.

The Sustainable Communities grant from HUD encouraged this sort of local collaboration, says Upton, who adds that for all the momentum created by the opening of the light rail in 2008, an initiative like Reinvent PHX wasn't possible without that federal funding, coming in the aftermath of the recession.

"We wouldn't be able to do this without that program," he says. "It's given us the resources and capacity to really do this work we think is important for the future."

Image courtesy of the [city of Phoenix](#).