

# Mesa launches new approach to long-range planning

By Gary Nelson

The Republic | azcentral.com Sun Mar 10, 2013 10:19 PM

Back in the last century, when suburban sprawl was chewing up an acre of desert every hour in the metro area, Mesa was the life of the party.

In a span of 50 years, the city morphed from a sleepy burg with fewer than 34,000 residents to a rambling string of trailer parks, subdivisions and strip malls with 13 times the 1960 population.

It made for a lot of impressive statistics for those who like growth for its own sake, but it also turned Mesa into something resembling Swiss cheese.

Even in older parts of town, vacant parcels lie next to tracts that were developed years ago. Some projects that didn't stand the test of time now stand empty or nearly so, begging for redevelopment.

Mesa planners noticed something else as they launched the city's next major visioning exercise: a sense of disconnectedness, a feeling among people that it wasn't easy to get from one neighborhood to the next, or even to gather with people on their own block.

So the aim of Mesa's current General Plan update, mandated by state law, is "sprawl repair."

The phrase echoed like a thunderclap last week as Planning Director John Wesley briefed the City Council on progress toward putting the new General Plan on the November 2014 ballot.

The first draft is due by October, and it will differ greatly from the general plans of Mesa's past.

There will still be color-coded maps. But they'll be used to describe broadly defined "character areas" rather than to dictate specific land uses on every parcel in town.

Within those character areas, any number of things will be allowed to happen as long as they don't upset the general nature of the neighborhood.

## **A city, not a 'boomburb'**

The aim, Wesley said, is to guide Mesa's development into a 21st-century American city — whatever, in the final analysis, that turns out to be — rather than leave it in place as a 20th-century American "boomburb."

That's a word coined by the Fannie Mae Foundation in 2001 to describe fast-growing suburbs that were becoming major population centers within the context of a large central city.

Of those, Mesa was listed as the biggest in the country. But the city saw it as something of a mixed blessing, noting a slightly disparaging tone to the term.

Based on feedback already received in community meetings and surveys, Wesley said Mesa residents value their neighborhoods above all other development priorities — but they now want those neighborhoods to have a sense of place, to be walkable, and to easily connect with other neighborhoods and uses such as retail.

High value also was placed on quality education, cultural amenities, parks and open spaces, economic development and transit.

To one degree or another, Mesa already is working on all of those.

But the new planning document aims to codify those community ambitions in a way that's tied to how land uses will evolve over time. By 2040 — the date for which the new vision is being crafted — the city hopes to have mitigated the worst effects of sprawl.

The council unanimously endorsed the approach after Wesley and senior planner Tom Ellsworth spelled it out in a study session last week.

Mayor Scott Smith, a former homebuilder, was particularly enthusiastic, noting that the new document could signal a return to the way American cities grew organically before zoning maps began dictating land-use patterns.

"I like the approach of allowing living to happen, and I like us going back to the way cities originally developed," Smith said.

The new planning document will not call a halt to growth. Many holes in the Swiss cheese remain to be filled, most notably in Mesa's eastern reaches.

There, for example, DMB Associates plans a grand opening on June 1 for its Eastmark development, which is expected to eventually place 15,000 dwellings on the former site of the General Motors Desert Proving Ground in the city's far-eastern area.

### **Population will still grow**

Mesa still expects a buildout population of 633,700, Wesley said, although there is no timeline for when it might be reached.

That would add nearly 200,000 people to the number that was tallied in the 2010 census. But with Mesa's era of large-scale annexations for the most part gone, the majority of the new residents will find a place to live within current city boundaries.