

Dismantling Metro Phoenix

Gary Paul Nabhan, PhD.

The news that Arizona is now the fastest growing state in the nation provides a wonderful opportunity to finally tackle the biggest problem in our state. No, not illegal immigration. It is the *legal immigration* to our Sunbelt state that has created the thousand pound gorilla squatting in the middle of Arizona. That gorilla is Metro Phoenix. It not only consumes otherwise productive land and water as if there will be no tomorrow, but leaves an ugly swath of solid waste, air pollution, and unpaid service bills in its wake.

More than a million new people coming to live in Arizona over the last six years, but no one can claim that such growth has brought any of us more of a sense of Arizona's geographical and cultural uniqueness. Instead, we get more street crime, more Burger Kings, more Walmarts, and more Anthem strip malls that lack any sense of place.

Metro Phoenix now has one of the highest per capita consumption rates of water and energy of any blemish on the face of the earth. If it and other metro areas continue this trend, we stand to lose 1.3 million acres of prime farm and ranchlands in Arizona by 2020. And yet, there are civic leaders who bandy around the word sustainability as if it is compatible with unbridled urban growth. Their most glaring hypocrisy has been their plans to grow Arizona State University into the largest university in the country *and* tout it as an international center in the practice of sustainability.

Who in their right mind-- from any foreign country in the world--would ever consider Metro Phoenix to be *the* place to come to study how resources can be sustainably used? For all his brilliance, ASU President Crow has apparently not noticed the

inherent contradiction in fostering the fastest growth of any university in the West while pretending to promote sustainability.

If civic leaders still have their heads in the sand, the rest of us must be willing to ask the obvious question: *Isn't it time to rationally plan the dismantling of Metro Phoenix?*

By using the term *dismantling of Metro Phoenix*, I am not merely proposing limits on its growth; it needs downsized and deconstructed. Such restoration has already begun in other urban areas, where entire rings of tacky subdivisions have been cleared for the expansion of green belts that make adjacent urban enclaves more live able. The advocates of New Urbanism have much to teach of us, but their goals must be linked to protecting and restoring quality of life in our rural areas as well.

Ultimately, we need to reform policies that funnel all water to urban growth, privileging it over the needs of rural residents, regional food security, and the survival of Arizona's endangered wildlife. We will then need to daylight the most fertile ground in the Valley of the Sun to ensure local food security will become priorities as both water and fossil fuel become more limited. Today, one out of every twenty-five calories of fossil fuel used in Arizona is used to package, refrigerate and transport food grown in other regions for our own consumption. If we are to eat, we will not be able to afford such wasteful excesses in the future.

My proposal to dismantle Metro Phoenix is not some misanthropic death wish for urbanites. Instead, I hope that the best aspects of urban living can be maintained in better-designed villages and in carefully restored neighborhoods. This should enhance rather than further degrade life in the Valley of the Sun.

However, Arizona's most unique assets are rural and natural, not urban or suburban. Last year's Arizona Town Hall presumed to

focus on Arizona's rapid growth and development, but failed to provide any new mechanisms for protecting Arizona's rural and natural heritage. It is time to limit the resources earmarked for each metro area, to reform state trust land regulations, to stop the fragmentation of farm and ranch lands, and to pay farmers and ranchers for the ecological services they provide for the rest of us. Otherwise, future generations will see none of Arizona's uniqueness, only a sad old gorilla starving in its urban cage.

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About the Author

Gary Paul Nabhan is Director of the Center for Sustainable Environments at Northern Arizona University. He is a co-editor and contributor to a new book, Five Ways to Value Working Landscapes of the West, and speaks at Cline Library on Tuesday January 23rd at 4 p.m. He will argue for a new Collaborative Land Stewardship Agenda for Northern Arizona University.

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