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Readers love our region, but growth is a concern

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

It's a paradox as old as progress.

Southern Arizonans who responded to an Arizona Daily Star online survey by the thousands love the region, don't want it to lose its character and fear for its future because of growth pressures.

Ninety percent feel good about their quality of life.

More than half would recommend that friends move here.

They are drawn to the outdoors environment, with three-fourths saying it's a major reason they live here.

Most expressed satisfaction with their neighborhoods and believe homes in their areas are priced about right.

But also by large margins, respondents said they don't favor continued population growth in Southern Arizona and they see growth as a huge challenge.

More than half believe the area doesn't have enough water to sustain even 15 years of growth — which some experts say isn't accurate — and that local governments should limit building permits to conserve water.

Many think slowing growth is the best solution to problems with traffic, housing, development, open space and air quality.

Generally speaking, they want stricter regulation of growth, even if that overrides private property owners' ability to do what they want with their land.

Many are willing to accept that conservation and growth management will cost more money, and they say they would pay higher taxes or fees to save open land, reuse more wastewater and build better roads.

But they don't have much confidence in local policymakers to handle growth issues effectively.

The online survey drew 3,388 responses spread across Southern Arizona's Pima, Cochise, Pinal and Santa Cruz counties, including strong concentrations in Tucson's core and suburbs.

Because anyone could respond, this was not a scientifically valid survey, said John Humenik, the Star's editor and publisher. But he was grateful so many people took the time to answer the 76 questions online, which shows they care deeply about these issues.

He said the paper's No. 1 priority was to make sure "every voice is

To our readers

Our region is at a crossroads.

The story above analyzes responses to a 76-question survey about growth, land use and water supply in our region. It also reveals the nuisances, opportunities, possibilities and misinformation about growth. More apparent in the survey is a strong undercurrent suggesting that the public is impatient waiting for a long-term vision that will enhance our way of life.

More than 3,300 of you completed our online survey. And more than 650 of you will join us to explore growth Friday during a community forum at the University of Arizona. It's that level of civic engagement that suggests advancing the community conversation is worthwhile work.

Why is your hometown newspaper leading this conversation? We are encouraged by local leaders who told us that our role as communicators and conveners is more important than ever. We agree. We also understand that by ensuring that no voice or idea goes unheard, we will lend support to those efforts already under way throughout the region.

We see the value of an informed discussion, and so do you.

John M. Humenik

Publisher & Editor

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heard who wants to be heard about growth."

David Kleinman, 48, of Tucson's Northwest Side, a survey respondent, said he doesn't favor continued growth because our region lacks roads, government services, water and other natural resources.

Growth is the region's most important issue "because I've seen what happened to Phoenix," said Kleinman, a Department of Public Safety officer. "Drive up to Phoenix between 6 a.m. and 9 a.m., Monday through Friday, and you come to a standstill at Elliott Road and Interstate 10, 11 miles from the Phoenix city limits," Kleinman said. "We can easily become a Phoenix if we don't control our growth issues, water use and land use."

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Tucson is damaged, he said, when land is razed "for the sake of putting little tiny boxes on it for people to move in, without having the infrastructure to support that — the police, fire and streets, or signing."

But not only does Kleinman love Tucson, he has no plans to leave it — just as 74 percent of respondents don't plan to leave over the next five years. He loves the outdoor environment and does a lot of running, hiking and bicycling, he said.

Paul Sevic, 81, said you can't stop growth, but he doesn't want it because he believes our water problems are more severe than many people realize.

"The aquifer is going away, little by little, and the Colorado River is going away," said Sevic, referring to the source of Central Arizona Project water. "Las Vegas is sucking up all that water, and they have all these water displays, imitating oceans and the Great Lakes ... and people trying to make their homes like Florida and Ohio," he said.

Quality of life is probably at its peak here, but water problems are going to start whittling that away, Sevic said.

"We've got good weather, and we've got traffic that is really not that bad when you consider Los Angeles and some other areas," he said. "But is there enough water for 15 years? Fifteen yes, but 50 no. One hundred years, definitely no. The place will be a ghost town."

Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry says he can't picture any kind of ghost-town scenario down the line. Even in the worst-case scenario, if water became extremely scarce in the next century, he predicts the situation could be handled by restricting its use to indoor necessities.

But readers' concerns that Tucson could run out of water show that people "don't want the good life to end, they don't want the party to be over," said Joseph Kalt, an economics professor at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University who was born and raised in Tucson.

"My sense is what they're telling you is they just don't want to destroy the ambience of Tucson," said Kalt, who lives here part of the year and also works as a visiting economics professor at the University of Arizona's Eller School of Management. "People like it here, fundamentally. That's why it's been growing since I was a little boy. But we don't want to be an L.A. with cactus."

However, Kalt believes, "No growth would be pretty scary. When you restrict the supply of housing, you drive the price up. The wealthy tend to come out better in those types of environments," he said. "The voices of the poor often don't get heard."

A huge share of the survey's respondents — 89 percent — own their homes, while in Pima County as a whole 68 percent own and 32 percent rent. This contrast could explain why the respondents don't feel there is a lack of affordable housing here, despite believing we are in a recession, Kalt said.

Urban planner David Taylor said he has repeatedly experienced the same attitudes of these survey respondents in his 50 years here.

"That's the baggage we bring with us when we are recruited here for spaciousness, vistas, clean air and water, critters, Spanish poppies in the spring — and we see rooftops. It's just a natural reaction," said Taylor, a demographics expert who works for the Pima Association of Governments.

These sentiments started building after World War II, as Southern Arizona communities offered wonderful attractions for newcomers, he said.

Something is lost through continued urbanization, in the eyes of people who moved in some time ago, Taylor said. That these people can't put themselves in the shoes of those who just moved in is a sign of people's split personalities on growth, he said.

Fifty-one percent of the survey's respondents have lived here 20 years or more. Relative newcomers — people here less than five years — made up just 14 percent of the respondents.

"What do we gain from growth?" Taylor said. "When I moved here, all the kids had to leave after they graduated from the university because there were no jobs. It's not that way anymore. When I got here, a seven-course meal was a six-pack and a burrito. Now there's a great amount of choice."

Regina Romero, a new Tucson City Council member, said residents appreciate what growth and progress have brought Tucson, but the region already had very valuable assets before it started growing.

"We already have culture. We already have history. We already have a wonderful desert," she said. "That is why so many people want to come here."

People can't close the door to Tucson, she said. "We're not stopping having babies; we're continuing to grow naturally as a community."

To protect what's good about Tucson while growth continues, she wants to bring people and money back into the urban core and produce walkable neighborhoods where people can live, work, play and find mass transit.

"If we're going to protect our desert, we're going to have to accept higher housing densities," Romero said.

"We have to take the next step. Do we really value the desert enough to protect it, to choose to live inside of the city?"

On Starnet

Find more reader comments on growth and water issues and view the entire survey results at growth.azstarnet.com.

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