EDITORIAL: 'Exurb' growth shows need for regional planning: Our view: Cooperation key to managing water, transportation and other services.(Editorial)

FULL TEXT: COPYRIGHT 2007 The Arizona Daily Star

Jun. 30--News that Marana and Sahuarita are experiencing "meteoric" growth isn't so much a surprise as it is an affirmation of the need for true regional planning.

Howard Fischer of Capitol Media Services wrote that the towns north and south of Tucson experienced triple-digit growth rates between 2000 and 2006. Marana's population grew by a whopping 116 percent. Sahuarita topped that with a population growth rate of 251 percent.

Tucson's population was far from stagnant during that time. But at a 6.5 percent growth rate, it appears anemic compared with growth in Marana and Sahuarita -- and the 22 percent rate recorded in Oro Valley.

It is noteworthy that the story was not about the astounding growth rates. Rather, it was about how that growth has moved away from the "old" cities and even moved away from the suburbs. It is now centered on the "exurbs" -- land that was not long ago agricultural.

As land and housing become less affordable in older cities and suburbs, the people with the fewest assets will seek their piece of the American dream where they can. Even if that dream robs them of the time required by long commutes to and from work.

What was obvious from the story was that the term "region" has grown much, much bigger. We know, for example, that intergovernmental cooperation is no longer a matter of agreements between municipalities in Pima County.

Now regional planning will require agreements from counties and communities up and down Interstate 10 from Tucson all the way to Phoenix. And Interstate 19 all the way to Nogales and the border.

Phoenix is now largely considered one of this country's city-states, much like New York, Los Angeles and Chicago. Areas outside those cities are considered satellites that revolve around the bigger planet. While Greater Phoenix is the center of the Arizona universe, Tucson is one of its many satellites.

The need for regional cooperation here is obvious with a single trip to the big city on Interstate 10. That little line of divided highway across the desert is completely inadequate to handle the traffic between Tucson and Phoenix. Driving on that stretch of roadway is just scary. But it is vital for the economies of both areas to keep that highway open to the free flow of commerce.

And there is no way to keep rooftops from blossoming in the once-vast desert between Tucson and Phoenix. Continued growth adds even more traffic to that piece of overused road -- providing the rationale for accelerating the development of high-speed commuter rail service between Tucson and Phoenix.
Water is another major issue/commodity that shouts for regional planning and cooperation. The precious liquid is so valuable that governments in Southern Arizona are fighting for the rights to sewage produced by communities.

In an ironic twist, it is sewage, not potable water, that has the power to limit growth. Tim Ellis, Arizona Daily Star reporter, wrote last week that the state’s Department of Environmental Quality ordered Pima County to stop approval of town-issued sewer hookups for Sahuarita until it expands its wastewater treatment plant -- which is functioning at near-capacity.

Triple-digit growth strains the services provided by governments and communities. But it shouldn't strain the ability to plan for and manage the problems created by that growth.

To see more of The Arizona Daily Star, or to subscribe to the newspaper, go to http://www.azstarnet.com.

Copyright (c) 2007, The Arizona Daily Star, Tucson

Distributed by McClatchy-Tribune Information Services.

For reprints, email tmsreprints@permissionsgroup.com, call 800-374-7985 or 847-635-6550, send a fax to 847-635-6968, or write to The Permissions Group Inc., 1247 Milwaukee Ave., Suite 303, Glenview, IL 60025, USA.