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Tempe's high-rises to create new views

Growing cities have nowhere to go but up

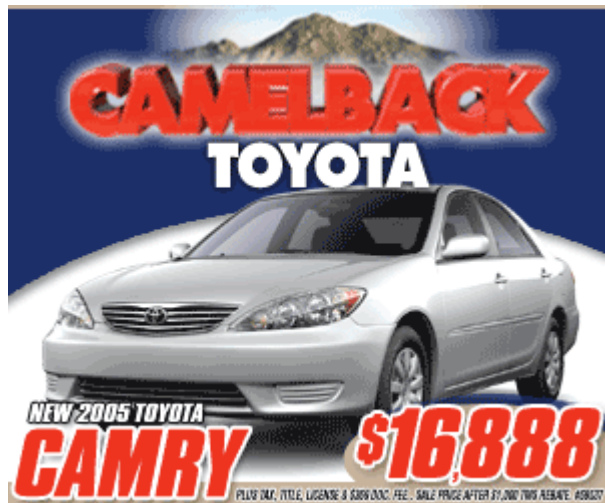
Jahna Berry
The Arizona Republic
Aug. 21, 2005 12:00 AM

Over the next five years, Tempe's skyline will get an extreme makeover, and other Valley cities are watching closely.

Gleaming, 22-story condo towers will dwarf familiar landmarks such as the Hayden Flour Mill's silos. Tempe Town Lake will be ringed with six-, eight- and 12-story developments.

Landlocked Tempe's trend toward taller buildings is a preview of what other Valley suburbs could face as they run out of land to grow, experts say.

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"We are not even close to build-out by urban standards," says Wellington Reiter, dean of Arizona State University's College of Design. "I am talking about growth vertically, and that process has barely begun in these cities."

While Glendale and other Valley cities continue to gobble up acres of desert, others will run out of space in a few years. And the

interest in high-rise living signals an important shift. Some postcard views of today could be lost, but others are eager to trade open desert vistas for the big-city energy the new approach could bring.

Chandler, five years from residential build-out, is drafting plans to expand the areas where taller buildings could rise. Scottsdale's tallest buildings are under construction and the city is exploring higher-density projects in the south. Mesa has 20 years before it reaches build-out, but officials are looking at ways to make the most of the land it has left.

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- Going vertical was Tempe's only option, Councilman Len Copple said.

"Because we are landlocked, we had to think about staying in place or going up," he said.

Without high-rises, Tempe faced some hard financial realities, Copple said. Other Valley cities are growing bigger and faster than Tempe, confronting the city with the loss of millions in state funding in upcoming years.

In fiscal 2007 the city expects to lose \$4 million to \$6 million after the state uses the mid-decade census to divvy up funding. Tempe stands to lose more state money over time if it does nothing, Copple said.

The condo towers would add thousands of residents who could help stabilize that trend. The newcomers also would pay taxes that nourish downtown businesses, fund parks and pay police officers.

In addition to all of the condominium projects going up around the city, real estate circles are buzzing about the impending sale of the 27-acre Rio East site on the south shore of Tempe Town Lake. While early Donald Trump rumors fell flat, it now appears that a large condo/hotel/retail project may be built there.

Tempe's neighbors are taking note.

Chandler is looking at new places to put mid-rises.

"Is it a symptom of impending build-out? Yes it is," said Hank Pluster, a city consultant who was Chandler's long-range planning manager until he retired in July.

Chandler is approaching the 240,000 population mark and has freeways that didn't exist when the mid-rise policy, which encompasses buildings taller than 45 feet, was crafted in 1985, he said.

Construction crews in Scottsdale are building two 140-foot towers for the city's Waterfront project, which would be the city's tallest buildings. City leaders are beginning informal discussions about zoning and density, especially in south Scottsdale, said Dave Roderique, the city's general manager of economic vitality.

"It's not only happening in Tempe, it's happening at 24th and Camelback," Roderique said of the popular Phoenix address. "It's a fact of life. When you run out of space you have to go up."

But bigger isn't always better, say neighborhoods activists who have battled high-rise projects. Rich Bank, former owner of Tempe bar Casey Moore's, ran for City Council twice and has spoken out against the "Manhattan-ization" of downtown Tempe.

In the past, city leaders have pushed for bigger buildings without really listening to the neighbors who would be affected the most by growth, he said.

"When people gave the wrong public input, it got canceled and they got someone else to rubber stamp it," Bank said.

Only recently have Tempe leaders begun asking developers to contribute to neighborhood preservation funds and other efforts to mitigate the impact on the community, he said.

In the future, Tempe leaders say, they hope to use virtual reality technology at ASU's Decision Theater that could examine how planned large developments would affect resources and even city views.

When other Valley towns decide if the sky is the limit, city leaders may be in for a fight. Angry Chandler neighbors nearly succeeded in putting a seven-story project

near Ray Road and Loop 101 on the ballot. Ultimately developers backed down and it will be five stories.

Mesa can build more subdivisions but is examining ways to revamp its core, Mayor Keno Hawker said. Several longtime car dealerships are expected to leave Main Street, which would make room for infill, and possibly high-density projects, he said.

Mesa plans to move cautiously, though.

"You don't want to make a mistake you will have to live with for 50 years," he said.

Like many West Valley cities Glendale also has plenty of room and then some -- it could tack on 50 square miles if it chooses. But city leaders want mid-rises near the Glendale Arena, Cardinals Stadium and Loop 101, Planning Director Jon Froke said.

"Even before the arena, we were looking for opportunities for mid-rises," he said, adding that Glendale will break ground on a 15-story hotel near the arena.

High-rises came slowly to the Valley, ASU's Reiter said. Many older U.S. cities are fenced in by a river or transit system, factors that often force them to build big apartment and condo towers to house people.

Phoenix "evolved in a completely different way," the dean said. Historically, the city had plenty of room to grow and likely attracted people who wanted to escape the skyscrapers they grew up with. Both of those factors are changing.

"It's kind of ironic," said Pluster of Chandler. "People moved here because they wanted to get away from Chicago."

Now some people who grew up with tall buildings are bringing their Midwestern expectations here.

"They say 'I had it back home,' " the planner said, " 'so why can't I have it here?' "

Reach the reporter at jahna.berry@arizonarepublic.com or (602) 444-7949.

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