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Plan Overview and Purpose

For many years, the Rio Verde Foothills region was a secluded valley far from the metropolitan Phoenix area, north of the McDowell Mountains. Many of the early Indian tribes who occupied the Verde Valley region left behind evidence and clues to their lifestyle. Later, the Yavapai and Apache Indians occupied the region until the late 1800s. Ranching operations used the area for cattle grazing beginning in the late 1800s. In 1960, land trades with the Tonto National Forest began opening up the area to private development, but it was not until the 1990s that significant residential uses began to appear. Today, people are attracted by the beauty of the area, the opportunity for rural and equestrian-related activities, and an alternative to city living. In 1990, there were only 33 people in the planning area; by 2000 the population had increased to 778.

The Desert Foothills Policy & Development Guide was adopted by Maricopa County in 1979 to act as a guide to growth and development of the area to the year 2000, and preserve and enhance the region's environment. The original planning area included 323 square miles and included several communities that were not yet incorporated such as Cave Creek, Carefree, and Fountain Hills. The area now known as Rio Verde Foothills was still primarily undisturbed Sonoran desert at that time and the Desert Foothills plan designated the future land use as Rural Density Residential (less than one dwelling unit per acre). In 1979, the area was zoned Rural-190 and Rural-70. Since then, the area has been rezoned to mostly Rural-43 with the exception of two sections of land that retain the Rural-190 zoning.

With the rapid rate of residential growth occurring in the planning area, it is vital to update the land use plan for the 20 square mile unincorporated Rio Verde Foothills area to help accommodate anticipated growth while preserving this area's quality of life and natural resources. Based on comments received during the public participation process, particular consideration is given to the continuance of the rural and equestrian lifestyle and compatibility of development with the natural environment. Residential development at very low densities (1 dwelling unit/acre or less) is intended for the entire planning area. Because total population is still relatively low and most residents currently prefer commuting to jobs and services out of the area, there is not an emphasis at this time on providing employment or services in the planning area. In addition, some residents are self-employed within the area. As population increases, plan updates will re-evaluate the need for employment opportunities, neighborhood commercial services, and public facilities.

Very low densities indicated in the future land use plan will help preserve the rural lifestyle, minimize impacts to the natural environment, provide compatible land



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use to adjacent public open space, and reduce the demand on groundwater resources. The Agenda for Action includes action items for scenic corridor implementation, a trails plan, rural development guidelines, and a fire protection plan.

Public Participation

Throughout the planning process, community participation was emphasized through several techniques. This participation allowed stakeholders to identify planning issues and concerns, as well as provide recommendations, comments, updates, and suggestions. Rio Verde Foothills residents, landowners, workshop participants, government entities, and other stakeholders were very helpful in identifying current issues and concerns. Some frequently identified local concerns include:

- ◆ The strong desire to maintain the low-density, rural residential and equestrian character in the planning area
- ◆ The need to limit subdivision development and discourage any commercial, retail, or industrial business
- ◆ The need for a community trail system to link open space areas including the Tonto National Forest, McDowell Mountain Regional Park, and McDowell Sonoran Preserve
- ◆ The significant hazard that the present open-range situation poses on Rio Verde Drive
- ◆ The need to protect native plants, wildlife, and wildlife habitats and corridors in the planning area
- ◆ Air quality is threatened by increasing amounts of dust and unpaved roads; however, most residents favor minimizing paving in the planning area
- ◆ Groundwater resources are limited in some areas and the long-term availability is unknown

What's New in the Plan?

- ◆ Updated information and citizen issues
- ◆ Geographic Information System (GIS) maps
- ◆ Five new planning elements required by Growing Smarter and Growing Smarter Plus legislation
- ◆ Planning area is now reduced in size, eliminating vast areas that have been incorporated by cities and towns since the 1979 Desert Foothills Policy & Development Guide
- ◆ Agenda for Action identifies measures that can help implement objectives and policies in the area plan



- ◆ Recommendation of community-crafted rural development guidelines to maintain and enhance the rural character of the community
- ◆ Recommendation to develop scenic corridor guidelines for Rio Verde Drive
- ◆ Recommendation of fire protection plan prepared by citizens and regional workgroup
- ◆ Recommendation of open space trails system that is coordinated with the Maricopa County Regional Trail System and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve

Conclusion

It is important to note that the Rio Verde Foothills Area Plan is not a document that represents ultimate buildout as many municipal general plans typically do. Rather, it prepares for and accommodates growth over the next ten to fifteen years, but will be reexamined and updated periodically to reflect current conditions and changes. While not a complete solution, the Rio Verde Foothills Area Plan helps address the effects of growth and development by enhancing cooperation between government agencies, citizens, and other affected interests, and by considering regional implications.

Area Plan Elements

This Area Plan contains a series of goals, objectives, and policies used to define development standards, guide public investment, and guide public and private decision making. A complete list of policies is included within the plan.

Land Use

The land use element discusses general land use, development, and preservation concepts. Efforts are directed at encouraging efficient and timely growth patterns.

Goal L1:

Promote efficient land development that is compatible with adjacent land uses, is well integrated with the transportation system, and is sensitive to the natural environment.

Objective L1.1: Encourage orderly, efficient, and functional development patterns.

Objective L1.2: Promote high quality residential development that is sensitive to the natural environment and compatible with adjacent land uses.

Objective L1.3: Allow high quality special use permits that are consistent with adjacent land uses.



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Objective L1.4: Preserve the scenic, rural, and residential equestrian character of the Rio Verde Foothills planning area.

Transportation

The transportation element defines a system of transportation facilities and services, including existing and future roads classification, transit and bikeway possibilities, road network connections, and system limitations. Efforts are directed at maximizing transportation system efficiency by coordinating land use and transportation planning.

Goal T1:

Provide an efficient, cost-effective, integrated, accessible, environmentally sensitive, and safe countywide multi-modal system that addresses existing and future roadway networks, as well as promotes transit, bikeways, equestrian and pedestrian travel.

Objective T1.1: Establish a safe, convenient, and efficient system for existing and future roadways while considering the need for equestrian and multi-use trails in the Rio Verde Foothills planning area.

Environment/Environmental Effects

The environmental effects element combines a survey of the physical and natural environment with an overview of anticipated effects that development may have on air quality, water quality, noise, visual quality, and sensitive plant and wildlife species.

Goal E1:

Promote development that considers adverse environmental impacts on the natural and cultural environment, preserves highly valued wildlife habitat, minimizes flooding and drainage problems, and protects historical and archaeological resources.

Objective E1.1: Encourage development that is compatible with significant natural environmental features and which does not lead to their destruction.

Objective E1.2: Improve air quality, water quality, and reduce noise impacts.

Objective E1.3: Preserve significant habitat areas for wildlife and desert plant species.



Economic Development

The economic development element focuses on creating a healthy economy in the planning area that increases living standards and quality of life.

Goal ED1:

Promote a growing, balanced, efficient, and diversified economy, consistent with available resources, that enhances quality employment opportunities, improves quality of life, and is sensitive to the natural and cultural environment.

Objective ED1.1: Encourage rural, low-density residential, and equestrian oriented development during the 10 to 15 year horizon of the Rio Verde Foothills Area Plan update, to retain the quality of life and land values enjoyed by this community.

Growth Areas

The growth areas element identifies future population projections and land use needs to accommodate growth in unincorporated Maricopa County and encourages efficient and functional growth patterns.

Goal G.1:

Promote orderly, timely, and fiscally responsible growth in Maricopa County.

Objective G.1.1: Encourage timely, orderly, and fiscally responsible growth within any approved mixed use Development Master Plan.

Objective G.1.2: Ensure that future growth is coordinated in an efficient manner with stakeholder input.

Open Space

The open space element provides an inventory of open space areas; analyzes future needs; and identifies policies and strategies for managing, protecting and acquiring additional open space areas.

Goal O1:

Maintain and, where necessary, encourage expanding the open space system for Maricopa County to address public access, connectivity, education, preservation, buffering, quantity, quality, and diversity for regionally significant open spaces.

Objective O1.1: Promote physical and visual public access to natural open space resources.



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Objective O1.2: Establish regional natural open space connectivity and linkages for both recreation and wildlife purposes.

Objective O1.3: Protect and enhance environmentally sensitive areas, including existing natural washes, steep slopes, historic, cultural, and archaeological resources; view corridors; sensitive desert; and significant wildlife habitat and ecosystems.

Objective O1.4: Encourage appropriate natural open space between communities and other land uses.

Objective O1.5: Improve quantity, quality, and diversity of open space and recreational opportunities where public access is protected and preservation is encouraged.

Objective O1.6: Promote the economic, environmental, and quality of life benefits of natural open space.

Water Resources

The water resources element describes the physical aspects of surface and groundwater features in the planning area, and addresses historic and projected water demand, future water supply and policy implications.

Goal W1:

Promote development that makes conservative use of renewable water supplies such as effluent, surface water, and Central Arizona Project water when feasible, and that uses groundwater as the primary water source only in the absence of renewable sources.

Objective W1.1: Encourage protection and enhancement of renewable water and groundwater supplies within the framework of state and federal laws, regulations, and guidelines for existing and future needs.

Goal W2:

Reduce the impacts of development on water quality, land subsidence, and riparian habitat.

Objective W2.1: Encourage voluntary actions and support federal, state, and local regulations and guidelines that protect and preserve the watershed, to safeguard current and future groundwater quality in the planning area.



Cost of Development

The cost of development element focuses on fiscal considerations relating to future growth in the planning area and Maricopa County in general.

Goal C1:

Ensure that new development pays its fair and proportional share of the cost of additional public facility and service needs generated by new development.

Objective C1.1: Develop a method to determine the need for, and assess costs of, new facilities and services required to serve new development in order to maintain service levels.

Objective C1.2: Adopt and implement level of service standards for new development to help promote consistency and certainty in the cost sharing process.

Agenda for Action

To help ensure effectiveness, stakeholders helped identify various long and short-term actions that will assist in plan implementation. Many of these actions require the continued participation of area residents, as well as public and private organizations. A complete list of actions is included within the plan.



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