

# **Urban Growth and Growing Pains: We need facts, not guesswork**

## **Position Paper, Part 2**

*by Mark Wheeler*

Growth brings growing pains, or so goes the conventional refrain so often repeated by public and private speakers alike when discussions turn to the subject of community development. Just exactly what these “growing pains” might entail is rarely ever described in much detail. However, it is often implied by the speaker mentioning such pains that residents who aren’t prepared for some radical changes in their community may be the ones to feel them most.

Growing pains have been forecast in public forum often enough right here in the Morongo Basin, and especially in the west end where growth has become a subject of openly heated debate. As usual, the exact nature of pains necessary to be endured hasn’t really been identified.

There have been a few vague allusions made to increased traffic congestion and periodic air pollution, but no one has said much of anything about the kinds of growing pains that cause financial hardship for many residents due to inflated property values and increased demand for essential services. Neither have the losses of local viewshed, hometown atmosphere and fraternity, or the loss of community heritage been identified as the kinds of pains some people may feel as a result of growth.

Notwithstanding these omissions of detail from most usage of the “growing pains” analogy in local discussion, an even more egregious omission has been a failure to note that growing pains can also include conflict. This is, in fact, the growing pain that is most conspicuously smarting in this community at present where a significant number of locals are mobilizing to challenge what they believe is an exploitative and ultimately ruinous assault on the place they call home. This is the growing pain of community conflict, and as residents split over the issue, their disagreement spills into municipal council chambers in the form of a growing pressure on elected officials to account more openly for the rationale behind their decisions to approve growth projects.

Civilized people usually don’t want conflict, but it’s also quite abundantly true that people do, indeed, tend to want what they want. Therein lies the germ of conflict, as in when two people or two groups of people want contradictory outcomes. Neighbor A wants a signal installed at the corner intersection, for instance, but neighbor B objects. If the light is installed for any reason, neighbor A gets what he or she wants while neighbor B doesn’t, and vice versa.

Needless to say, many conflicts can be resolved with reasonable compromise. Yet, this isn't true for all. There are simply some issues whose various outcomes are mutually exclusive or even mutually antagonistic, and it is increasingly apparent that the matter of growth in the Morongo Basin is one of them.

This state of affairs, however, cannot be correctly blamed on a simple growth vs. no-growth divide in the population. On the contrary, growth of any and all sorts is not the issue. Rather, it is the particular kind of growth called "urban expansion growth," and the magnitude of its proposed dimensions in this community, that is at the very heart of the disagreement.

## **Competing interests**

Among those who oppose this kind of growth are many who moved here on the reasonable expectation that this area is too far from the network of mainstream trade and commerce to be a sensible choice for urban expansion ventures.

They had any number of different personal reasons for moving here, but the one thing many of them had and still have in common is the desire to live in a community that isn't overrun by the kind of profiteering development so universally known across the nation as urban and suburban sprawl.

What these people bought into when they moved here was a life and lifestyle not crowded and pushed and shoved around by more aggressive and competitive urban tendencies. They wanted the relative peace and quiet of a remote and rural community, and for those who really did their homework upon moving here, at least for those who moved into Yucca Valley after the town's incorporation in 1991, they were pleased to find a General Plan which constitutionally defined the community as a rural one and which declared that this identity and character would be preserved.

(Joshua Tree's recently updated [Community Plan](#) states much the same in its own terms.)

Here was a town, these people thought, whose founders established a covenant with residents to preserve the kind of community character they wanted, and they trusted their elected representatives to uphold that covenant.

Yet, changing political policies and market practices over the last three decades have wrought changes everywhere, including in the Basin. New residents over the years have arrived with their own expectations for the place and, as many of them have stated their position in public hearings, some expectations call for an urban transformation of the community that is squarely contrary to the desires of those who settled here for rural character.

Although this matter of community development may not resonate with all residents equally, it has most certainly become a critical issue for a significantly large number of

them. They have taken their expectations to council meetings, made headlines in the newspaper with their various arguments, and have commenced a court of public opinion which testifies in vigorous terms that judgment for or against urban expansion in this area will clearly uphold one group of citizens while thoroughly dismissing the other.

Which group should prevail? Both have investments and both are invested in protecting them.

The pro-urban group argues that commercial and market-housing growth in the community is necessary for economic progress. The other side argues that these economic drivers cannot be supported by available resources nor can they ever be supported due to the Basin's location. (See [part I](#) of the series.)

The expansion group argues that urban growth is the growth of choice in a market dominant world, and is inevitable in any event. Opponents argue that the market does not define their quality of life, and argue also that General Plans in this area were written the way they were in order to protect communities against growth trends that could very well ruin them for many already established residents.

Some on the pro-urban growth side have presumed to claim a "right" to development based on private property rights assumptions. Members of the other side have countered strongly that such a position obviously ignores the legal tension that exists in the law between private property rights and the public's right to defend itself and its home ground against private interests.

Members of both sides want what they want, and we all have something of an implicit right to our own expectations. However, in this matter of urban expansion in the Morongo Basin, citizen expectations contradict one another. Yet, municipal leaders must make a decision on the matter in order to either properly plan for the introduction of more urban expansion projects into their communities, or to adopt zoning and development code requirements that would effectively constrain the practicality of pursuing such projects in their communities.

Unfortunately, leaders who must make this decision don't have the luxury of a community consensus to use as the justification for whatever decision they make since residents are divided on the issue. Moreover, neither can the leaders use citizen "rights" as the prime directive for the decision they make one way or another because the citizens' competing rights to expect their community will reflect their values and preferences are equally valid and effectively neutralize each other.

## **Getting the facts**

In a case like this, decision-makers must use an impartial but convincing criterion for making their choice. Since they have made it repeatedly clear that, in their view, the development of economic prospects in their communities is of primary importance, then

the criterion they use for making the final decision must be one which will reveal economic facts and evidence.

What is needed is a detailed market analysis of the area, one that will identify the Basin's market potential based on its location and resources. In addition, and most importantly, such an analysis would include an evidence-based cost-benefit comparison for the different types of economic drivers the Town of Yucca Valley might want to develop.

Nobody would disagree that there is not a town the Morongo Basin capable of attracting large-scale manufacturing, on the scale of GM or Boeing, at any time in the foreseeable future. Hence, it would be foolish to pin the economic future of Basin communities on the hopes of having a huge manufacturing plant in the vicinity any day soon.

However, what about urban and suburban expansion? What about developing Yucca Valley into a hotbed of commerce, one crowded with business parks and all the housing needed for thousands of employees?

What about building it into a bedroom community for the Coachella Valley, San Bernardino, Redding, Moreno Valley, L.A. and so on? After all, southern California is the land of long-distance commuting, so why can't people commute from Yucca Valley?

Perhaps they can, and perhaps Yucca Valley could be the next desert Mecca of commerce. But, there isn't a single shred of evidence upon which to base an assumption that either scenario could succeed here. Considering the town's location, escalating gas prices, the deficit of local employment opportunities that pay anything more than minimum wage, and the town's limited infrastructure resources — the list goes on — there is sound reason to doubt that such a development strategy will work.

A proper cost-benefit analysis for urban/suburban development in Yucca Valley would estimate the revenue side of such economic activity and also calculate its costs. How would they balance?

For instance, would the Town really make enough in growth revenues to pay for all the increased roadwork, sewer system, flood control, water and law enforcement necessary to serve a large commuting population? Or, would it forever be deficient in these facilities and services and be forced, like many towns, to scavenge for every dime by approving more and more growth projects, no matter how undesirable, and in the process increase the stress on its infrastructure deficit even more?

By using variables for current southern California demographic and market trends, a thoroughgoing cost-benefit analysis can reasonably calculate the costs of growth for a town based on its current level of development and its resources. This is the kind of information upon which sound decisions are made.

Truly modern cost-benefit instruments calculate full costs for the subjects of their study. For example, a sophisticated assessment would calculate the roadway costs necessary to

support a larger commuting population in Yucca Valley. However, it would also calculate indirect costs for increased traffic congestion, highway mishaps, the need for more law enforcement, increased air pollution and so on.

Full-cost accounting raises the bar for decision-making and for accountability. It is changing the way we value resource and materials usage and this, in turn, is changing the economics of how we organize and conduct the business of living, livelihood and governing. In many cases, it reveals that the long-term costs for an activity will by far exceed any short-term gains made, and in some cases, it reveals that even the short-term gains are misconstrued.

## **Good business**

On many occasions, local officials have stated that a town is a business and should be run like one. This, of course, rather stretches the analogy. The operations of a town entails responsibility for the quality of life and well-being of town residents, and the scruples and stewardship of this duty by far exceeds the single, simple responsibility a business has to show a profit.

Nevertheless, if the Town of Yucca Valley, or any town for that matter, wants to manage at least some of its affairs according to sound business principles, the place to start is to justify economic development decisions on the basis of sound market survey data. Is there really a sound market for urban expansion in Yucca Valley, or is such a direction in economic planning really only manufacturing a false market of opportunism that will cost the community far more in the long run than it will ever make?

How about tourism? Would this be a more appropriate economic driver for Yucca Valley, or for all the communities in the Basin? Perhaps. However, it should still require the confidence of solid cost-benefit evidence before this or any particular market identity is chosen. Anything less is only guesswork.

Town's implement economic strategies in a number of ways. Those with healthy budgets might spend money on industry recruitment, urban renewal or maybe build a sports stadium. Those without much money must use other strategies.

For instance, a town might invite residential building and corporate retail by being easily persuaded to make zoning changes as needed, or by waiving or reducing development fees to nominal amounts. Planning commissions can give automatic permit extensions, allowing developers to maximize their market options to either follow-through according to plans or change the plans, or perhaps even sell the shelf-ready project to someone else someday. A town can also ignore select violations of permit requirements and development code ordinances and, in the case of retail projects, it can agree to reduce or waive sales tax revenues for a certain period.

The point is, town and city councils do promote or discourage specific agendas with their votes. They pursue strategic plans that have goals and objectives, and among those goals and objectives, many have a revenue enhancement motive.

In and of itself, a revenue enhancement motive in strategic planning is simply good sense. However, when an economic strategy for a town anticipates major changes in town character and perhaps even in the lifestyle of its residents, then the rationale for such a strategy should be defensible in the most impeccable of terms, and this requires rather much more in the way of legitimate evidence than the mere ideological assumptions of the decision-makers. What will the full costs for this strategy be? Who will pay, and how much?

### **Fairest growing pains**

Growth proponents have, in both words and print, accused limited growth advocates of being destructive of community improvement, recalcitrant of progress, and hardheadedly obstructionist in their efforts to stop or slow growth prospects. On their own side, the limited-growthers have given as good as they've gotten.

Both parties have their vested interests and both parties, as Julius Caesar purportedly said about men in general, "freely believe that which they desire."

What both sides of this issue believe about their opponents is inextricably bound up in their desires to live in a community that reflects their respective expectations, and they will not be free from those beliefs until one or the other of their expectations is upheld.

This is the growing pain of community conflict and for as painful as it is, it is probably the fairest growing pain of all since, at this point at least, it affects everyone equally.

Growing pains in developing communities too often only hurt the least financially capable residents. As the standard of living increases beyond a minimum, those whose incomes are stuck at minimum are usually forced to find other accommodations. Similarly, long-term residents who can't adjust to a faster pace or who can't abide the loss of their community's ambiance or the viewshed from their homes, end up moving to another location.

On the flip side, growth proponents may escape growing pains altogether as they count on new opportunity and assets to increase with the arrival of each new store and subdivision. Their personal prospects gain with every new driveway, parking lot and building slab poured out onto the landscape and they may scarcely notice the migration out of town of those former neighbors who can either no longer afford the price of growth or who can't abide its excess.

The growing pain of conflict now appearing in Yucca Valley and the greater Morongo Basin is fair because people on both sides of the growth issue are equally subject to the

cutting edge of public inquiry. Whose personal motives in the matter are most selfish and destructive? Whose gain in the matter will have the least amount of community impact, and whose rationale is least poisoned by the desire for personal financial gain or the narcissistic hunger for ever more convenience?

Yet, if this inquiry will produce anything in the end besides hard feelings and enmity, if it will be constructive, then it must demand accountability. If urban expansion and/or bedroom community demographics can really work in this area, owing to the stakes involved, then the local decision-makers who have clearly already decided to pursue this development model must prove the reason for their choice on the strength of solid evidence.

They have not done this to date, and the upshot is that residents, invested in their opposing expectations, are left to examine the matter themselves in the court of public opinion. Whereas this may be productive of spirited public debate and an active citizenry, it is a debate and activism that calls for resolution, the kind of resolution that is possible only when it is sufficiently informed. It's time to get the facts and take the communities in this Basin forward into a future based on solid evidence and full cost-benefit analysis instead of second-rate guesswork, or worse, hidebound ideology.