

MAG Celebrates Golden Anniversary

Decade Three: 1987-1997



April 12, 2017, marked 50 years that the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) has been serving the region. This is the third part of a five-part series that covers the five decades of MAG and the major milestones that represent how MAG has made a difference to the residents of our region.

The Economic Tide Turns

The elation surrounding passage of Proposition 300 was short-lived. In 1987, the Arizona Department of Transportation (ADOT) announced new freeway system cost estimates that were much higher than originally estimated.

“Unfortunately, a lot of the cost estimates early on in the program were very gross estimates,” recalls MAG Transportation Director Eric Anderson. “As ADOT actually started designing the system, it was clear that we had to make additional improvements.” Although painful, Anderson calls the changes the right decisions at the time.

But soon, construction costs began skyrocketing. A real estate boom increased the costs for right-of-way. MAG and ADOT found themselves in the spotlight over the rising program costs.

Freeway costs now projected at \$4-6 billion
 Officials blame land prices, extras
By Susan Leonard
 The Arizona Republic

“We saw revenues coming in significantly under the projections, which really caused kind of a tsunami happening, because we had higher costs and lower revenues,” says Anderson. “It really put the freeway program in a crisis mode.”

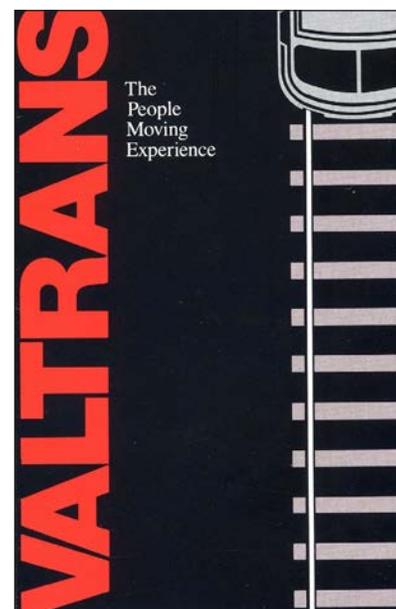
Adding to the uncertain economic climate, the savings and loan crisis was creating a nationwide financial meltdown.

ValTrans

Despite the churning economy, the region was moving forward with a second half-cent sales tax proposal known as ValTrans, designed to be the transit half of Prop 300. The \$8 billion proposal included more than 100 miles of elevated light rail and bus improvements. But journalist Bob Robb, who worked for the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce at the time, says voters were simply in the wrong frame of mind.

“As I recall, it went to ballot in 1989, which was only four years after the initial sales tax for the freeways had been proposed and approved. So it was a little quick to go back to the well,” says Robb.

ValTrans went down in a crushing defeat of nearly two to one. Former Phoenix Mayor Terry Goddard believes the region still suffers from the loss.



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“If we’d been able to pass in 1989 the Valtrans program, we’d be way ahead of the curve in terms of transportation, in terms of air quality, in terms of just a better place to live,” states Goddard, who called the defeat a valuable political lesson.

Proposition 400—Take One

Five years passed. Transportation supporters continued to believe that Maricopa County was dangerously behind the curve in moving cars and people. Proposition 400 went before voters in 1994. It sought to raise the sales tax by a half cent, with revenues divided between freeways and transit. It also would have extended the Prop 300 sales tax, scheduled to expire in 2005. Former Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs, who would chair MAG from 1996-1998 but who was already active on the Regional Council, recalls that competing interests stalled transportation progress.

“The Valley was still a place of a lot of conflict. (There were the) people who had been in Arizona and in the Valley for many, many years and really were resistant to change, and then there were all

the new people who had come, who were expecting transportation systems like they left in the major cities they came from,” says Scruggs. “And that’s not just the freeways, but also transit, which was pretty much nonexistent.”

Unfortunately, the controversies over higher costs, lower revenues and right-of-way issues remained a sore point in the press, and on November 8, 1994, Proposition 400 failed by a 6-5 ratio. “Lack of Trust Sank Freeway Levy,” and “Voter Trust on Use of Funds Was Issue,” were among the headlines following the election.

“By 1994, we had put a lot of management practices in place to restore the fiscal integrity of the program, but I don’t think by 1994 that progress really had been seen publicly yet,” explains Eric Anderson.

“When it comes to talking about funding for transportation, there’s a core group of people who are against growth,” adds Dennis Mitchem, a transportation advocate who led a group of proponents called Residents for Safe and Efficient Transportation. “They will always be against any tax that is going to go to transportation that will promote growth. And that is a fact to be dealt with.”

The Prop 400 defeat in 1994 led Governor Fife Symington to put forward his own freeway program. Among the freeways cut from the map were the Paradise Freeway, which would have run parallel to Camelback Road; and three West side freeways: the Estrella Freeway, which would later become Loop 303; Grand Avenue, which was then envisioned as a freeway; and the Agua Fria Freeway south

of Interstate 10. Mayor Scruggs vividly recalls standing in her kitchen when she received the call from Governor Symington’s chief of staff.

“I was just stunned. Just absolute shock. As were my colleagues across the Valley. It was such a setback,” says Mayor Scruggs. “And if you think back, we, the Valley, were in a time of such feverish growth, and our whole transportation system was so far behind the times anyway.”

Left on the map but unfunded were the Santan, Red Mountain, Sky Harbor and Hohokam freeways. The South Mountain Freeway was proposed as a toll road. The MAG Regional Council reluctantly approved the Governor’s plan.

MAG Splits From League

The defeat of Prop 400 had many taking a second look at MAG. Some were proposing a new agency with more authority. Mayor Scruggs believed it wasn’t a new agency that was needed, but rather that MAG needed to separate itself from the League of Arizona Cities and Towns. “Not because there was anything wrong with the League,” says Scruggs, but to ensure MAG’s survival at a time many were trying to take over the agency.

“There were competing sources from outside of MAG that wanted to get control of transportation planning and implementation in



Former Phoenix Mayor Terry Goddard



Former Glendale Mayor Elaine Scruggs



Governor Symington’s freeway program is discussed at an open house meeting in 1995.

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the Valley. But who knew what was better (for our residents) than the mayors of the cities in the MAG region?” she questions. “So it was really a matter of needing to take charge, take control, and get things moving forward.”

In 1996, the Regional Council voted to make MAG a separate entity. Some MAG staff were housed with Maricopa County, others at the League. The split meant that all staff would be brought together under one roof. In 1997, MAG moved to its current location.



To further establish the credibility of MAG, Mayor Scruggs chaired a working group to “Re-engineer the MAG Policy Process.” Refinements included a more transparent and user-friendly agenda. Each agenda item would also include a “transmittal summary” to recap hefty technical material and show how previous committees had voted.

Finally, a Brighter Outlook

Prop 400 was defeated, but MAG was not. As the decade neared its end, the revenue picture began to improve. Transportation planners sharpened their pencils. A fiscal analysis conducted by Eric Anderson, who was then an economist contracted by MAG, refined many of the program assumptions. When the columns were tallied, another \$500 million was on the

table. Enough to add back in the Red Mountain and Santan freeways and to accelerate many other sections of the freeway by seven years, including the Loop 101.

“We talk about regionalism and it’s hard sometimes to be regional. It’s much easier to just worry about your little part of the world. But I have to say, all the mayors who served at that time really pulled together,” recalls Scruggs. “And we worked in friendship, camaraderie. Yes, there was competition, there’s always going to be competition, but it was really with an eye for how can we make the whole Valley work at once. What can we do to immediately have an impact? And that’s how we put those suddenly found dollars to work.”

Air Quality

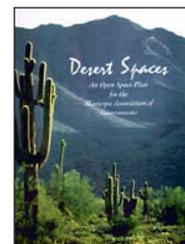
While things were in flux on the transportation side, MAG also continued its efforts in air quality. Congress passed the 1990 Clean Air Act Amendments imposing stringent air quality requirements. The region was classified as a Moderate Area for coarse particulates, or PM-10. MAG prepared a plan to address the new dust standard. After 1996, there were no violations of the eight-hour carbon monoxide standard or the one-hour ozone standard.



Retiring Scottsdale Councilmember Bill Soderquist, with MAG staff members Roger Herzog and Lindy Bauer, stack up the MAG air quality plans and documentation in 1994.

Desert Spaces

In a separate effort to protect the environment, in 1995, the MAG Regional Council adopted the *Desert Spaces Plan*. The Plan identified and recommended conservation and management strategies for natural resources and open spaces in Maricopa County. The Plan recognized that residents of the MAG region were at risk of losing access to mountains, scenic views, Sonoran desert, and riparian areas that define the natural character of the Valley of the Sun. More than 20 years later, the Desert Spaces Plan still serves as a framework for decision makers at all levels to establish and maintain a system of open spaces.



MAG 1995 Desert Spaces Plan

Other Achievements

There were many other achievements in the third decade. In 1992, MAG voted to allow a large portion of MAG federal construction funds to be allocated for completion of the freeways.

“This was a major commitment by the cities and towns and another great example of regionalism,” says MAG Executive Director Dennis Smith. “Instead of using the money for local transportation projects, the local governments recognized the importance of keeping our commitments with the voters for a connected freeway system.”

Through MAG, in 1995 the largest mid-decade special census in the nation was conducted. MAG hired 5,000 employees, working with the Census Bureau to count Maricopa County’s population.



Logo design contest winner for the 1995 Special Census.

In 1997, MAG entered the digital age by establishing its first Web site to provide information to the public. 

The story will continue in the next quarterly edition of MAGAZine, focusing on 1997-2007.