

# FORUM 411

Engaging Arizona's Leaders

## WE ARE L.A.?

It's hard to peg the point at which "L.A." came to stand for dystopia. Southern California was, after all, perceived as the American Eden in the early 20th century. The mythmaking may have started in 1884 with *Ramona*, Helen Hunt Jackson's romanticized version of life at the Spanish missions. But it was probably Charles Frederick Lummis' magazine *Out West*, bankrolled by the legendary General Harrison Otis of the *Los Angeles Times*, which turned boosterism for the emerging City of Angels into a high art. Life on the beach or in the arroyo became the Western incarnation of the American dream, complete with the scent of citrus blossoms, glow of beautiful sunsets, and promise of the meritocracy of the frontier.

In the early 1900s, a stunning set of economic forces converged on Southern California. The oil that had been visibly seeping out of the La Brea tar pits turned out to be recoverable. William Mulholland's aqueduct began delivering water from the Owens Valley in 1913. The astronomy and aerospace industries and Cal Tech had their origins in this period. Los Angeles even invented an industry named after itself: "Hollywood," designed to document and disseminate the lifestyle of freedom, space, and opportunity. In the 1920s, L.A. became *the* magnet for Western migration. Between 1920 and 1924, 100,000 people a year moved into Los Angeles – a number Phoenix wouldn't replicate until the end of the 20th century.

But the image of Los Angeles quickly became more complex than a cartoonish travelogue. Four hundred movies a year couldn't all paint a positive picture. As Mike Davis pointed out in *City of Quartz*, sunshine and noir simultaneously began to represent the culture of L.A. From *Day of the Locust* to *The Big Sleep*, the City of Angels had a dark underbelly.

Ultimately, the dream probably died on the freeways. Mobility was the holy grail to Angelenos, and most positive city scenes somehow involved the automobile. Sunshine was even more fundamental – the *raison d'être* for there being such a city at all. When reality came to be a crawling vehicle in a brown cloud, the fall from grace came quickly. As entry-level housing began to cost half a million bucks, the lifestyle promise seemed to ring hollow.

Forum 411 is a quarterly briefing series offering policy, business, and community leaders information on Arizona's critical issues. Forum 411 refers to Morrison Institute's location at the ASU Downtown Phoenix campus, which is located at 411 North Central. Morrison Institute seeks to be a source of public policy ideas and provide a venue for discussion. Morrison Institute invites everyone to be part of Forum 411.



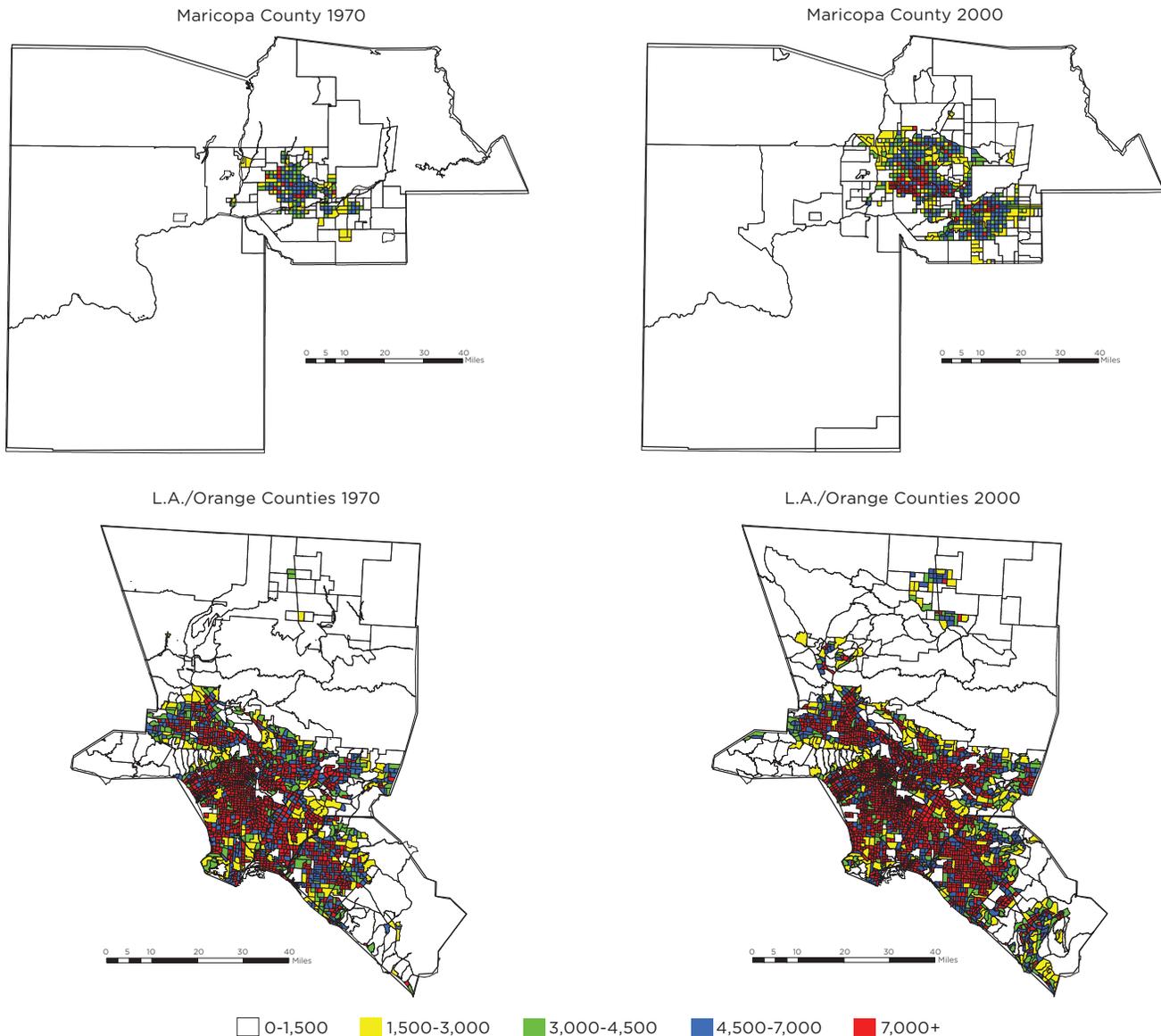


Columnist Gregory Rodriguez wrote recently in the *Los Angeles Times*: “[N]o city is more burdened by its myth than L.A. That’s because ours – crafted by regional boosters even before the birth of L.A. as a modern American city – is the ultimate myth: Los Angeles as paradise. It makes the gulf between the ideal and the real deeper here than anywhere else.”<sup>1</sup>

Other than its eponymous pyrotechnic bird, Phoenix has not been a city of deep myth. Only a handful of movies have been set here. The closest thing to a signature song is about a guy driving away from L.A., musing on what his lost love will be doing “by the time he gets to Phoenix.” Serious Phoenix detective fiction didn’t exist until Jon Talton started his Mapstone mystery series in 2000.

## FILLING IN AND SPREADING OUT: PHOENIX AND L.A. BOTH GOT BIGGER

*Total Population, Maricopa and Los Angeles/Orange Counties, Density per Square Mile, 1970 and 2000*



Source: GIS Services, Institute for Social Science Research, Arizona State University.

Yet, Phoenix and L.A. have such apparent shared heritage: huge water projects, real estate developers, parking lots, palm trees, and faux Spanish architecture. Our city seems so obviously the younger sister of a Hollywood starlet that comparison and emulation are inevitable. The Phoenix/L.A. conceit is deep-seated, chronic, and nearly always offered as something to avoid. Consider just part of a collection from a 1996 *Phoenix Gazette* column by Bill Hart:

*Do you want this to be another Detroit or New York or, worse yet, another Los Angeles?* Former Governor Howard Pyle, 1987

*We don't want to be another Los Angeles. Nobody wants that.*

Jim Marsh, Former Director, Arizona Department of Commerce, 1991

*In a recent poll, 90% of Arizonans said it would be bad if Phoenix became more like Los Angeles.* *The Arizona Republic*, 1991

*Phoenix still can avoid becoming another Los Angeles by building a balanced transportation system.*

David Baron, Director, Arizona Center for Law in the Public Interest, 1993

*There are things that can be done to stop the Valley's slide toward becoming another Los Angeles.* *The Arizona Republic*, 1994

Phoenix, a city often accused of having no identity, certainly has long known what it doesn't want to be. What is it we are so afraid of? All big cities have mixed images, but the über-negative view of Los Angeles is grounded in three attributes – smog, congestion, and sprawl. These problems and the comparisons between Phoenix and L.A. are worth a closer examination.

## Smog

The word for the nasty combination of smoke and fog entered the English language more than a hundred years ago, but it came to symbolize the decline and fall of the land of sunshine beginning in the 1950s. Big cities had long had air quality issues, but Los Angeles was supposed to be all about fresh air and the outdoors, so changing the color of the sky seemed more threatening. Over time, two other characteristics made Southern California's smog significant: it was caused primarily by cars, and it didn't go away. These phenomena led the L.A. basin to become a world leader in pollution and in efforts to regulate against it.

Los Angeles began its air pollution control program in 1945. The Los Angeles County Air Pollution Control District was the first of its kind in 1947. California established the nation's



## L.A. AND PHOENIX HAVE BOTH IMPROVED AIR QUALITY OVER TIME

*Annual Average Metro Levels,\* 1990-2006*

Metro Los Angeles	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006
Sulphur dioxide (ppm)	0.0030	0.0024	0.0019	0.0021	0.0017
Ozone (ppm)	0.1210	0.1050	0.0860	0.0790	0.0830
Particulates (10 µm <sup>3</sup> )	115.3000	123.3000	83.5000	68.3000	63.8000
Metro Phoenix	1990	1995	2000	2005	2006
Sulphur dioxide (ppm)	0.0033	0.0020	0.0028	0.0021	0.0021
Ozone (ppm)	0.0800	0.0870	0.0820	0.0770	0.0800
Particulates (10 µm <sup>3</sup> )	86.9000	84.6000	112.7000	81.9000	79.0000

\* The values shown are the composite averages among sites.

Source: *Metropolitan Statistical Area Trends, Air Quality Trends by City 1990-2006*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, [www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa\\_allpoll\\_23aug07.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa_allpoll_23aug07.pdf).



first auto tailpipe emission standards in the late 1960s. By the end of the 1970s, tougher regulations, cleaner fuels, and vehicle inspections were starting to work, and L.A.'s air quality began improving steadily. However with ever-more people, businesses, and cars, success is increasingly difficult to attain. California has continued to look to tougher standards and new control methods as a result.<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile in Phoenix, state legislation in 1962 started decades of air pollution control efforts at the county and state levels. Even so, many seemed content to shrug and note, "it's always been dusty here." Indeed, dust from construction and agriculture has made particulates an especially notable part of the Valley's pollution issues. But other substances have been problems as well, particularly those, such as ozone, that are due to cars.

The 1990 federal *Clean Air Act* amendments were one reason Phoenix has often found itself in an air quality bind in recent years. Arizona established vehicle inspections in 1995, among other actions, but the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency said Phoenix was a "serious" nonattainment area in 1996 for some pollutants and in 1997 for ozone.<sup>3</sup> From that time, Phoenix put new measures in place and went nearly a decade without an ozone violation. However by the mid-2000s, tougher regulations and continuing population growth – which meant more driving, industry, and construction – made air quality a priority problem again. Today, Phoenix is still working against the federal clock. New plans are in place and the "Running Out of Air" campaign is working to develop public support, but the threats are real.

While Phoenix and L.A. have both improved air quality, L.A.'s improvement seems more dramatic – if only because it was so bad and was *the* "smog city."<sup>4</sup>

### Congestion

In the March 1965 edition of *Fortune*, Richard Austin Smith wrote that "the essence of Los Angeles, its true identifying characteristic, is mobility. Freedom of movement has long given life a special flavor there." Reyner Banham explained in *Los Angeles, the Architecture of Four Ecologies* that the region's original shape resulted from the Pacific Electric "big red" trolley cars of Henry Huntington. In another of the great L.A. legends, the automobile and gas companies are said to have conspired to doom the streetcars (remember this from *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*). The freeways started making L.A. into autopia beginning in the late 1930s, but the transformation really took off after World War II. Yet, construction couldn't keep up with increased travel. Travelers' annual delays from congestion in Los Angeles crept up from 45 hours in 1982 to 72 hours in 2005.<sup>5</sup>

Phoenix, meanwhile, resisted freeways for intra-urban travel longer than any other major American city. In 1967, most regions the size of metro Phoenix carried five times more traffic on freeways. Congestion was increasing dramatically, and civic groups and consultants were pushing for

### PHOENIX IS CATCHING UP IN FREEWAY USE

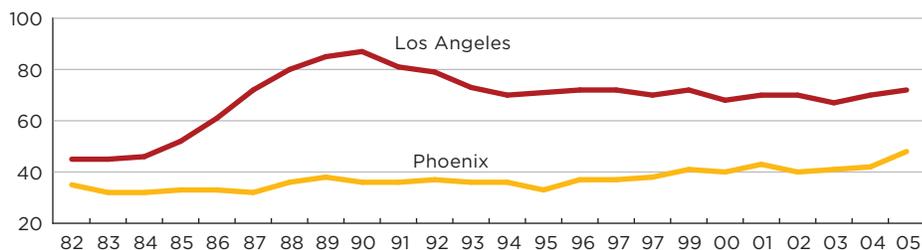
Percent Daily Vehicle Miles of Freeway Travel, 2005

	1985	2005
Los Angeles	46%	52%
Phoenix	14%	45%

Source: Texas Transportation Institute, 2007.

### TRAFFIC DELAYS IN PHOENIX ARE NOW WHAT L.A.'S WERE IN THE 1980S

Annual Hours of Delay per Traveler, 1982-2005



Source: Texas Transportation Institute, 2007.

more freeways. But opposition was also forming. In late 1972, Eugene Pulliam, publisher of *The Arizona Republic* and *The Phoenix Gazette*, launched a crusade against the proposed freeway known as the “Papago inner loop.” Pulliam cited freeways as a negative influence on Los Angeles, and he, his wife, and many other residents thought such roadways would alter the desirable Phoenix lifestyle. Three public votes ensued, and little was built. In 1977, 40 miles of freeway were in use in Phoenix. By 1985, Phoenix still had only 70 miles of freeway or 275 “lane miles.”

In 2005, Los Angeles had 5,870 lane miles of freeway, and Phoenix 1,405. But Los Angeles still ranks as the #1 most congested city in the U.S., according to the INRIX National Traffic Score Card, while Phoenix is #15. The annual delay per traveler in person hours in Phoenix is currently near 50, 66% of that in L.A.<sup>6</sup>

How has Phoenix managed to remain dramatically less congested than Los Angeles despite having fewer freeways? The answer may lie in the grid that characterizes our relatively flat farming town that grew big. The Federal Highway Administration recognizes 24,833 miles of roadways of all types in the L.A. metro area. The Phoenix area has half as many miles, but with just over a quarter of the population. Phoenix counts four miles of road per person and L.A. only two. This difference is made up of a small advantage for Phoenix in arterial street mileage, but much higher mileage in smaller local streets. “Daily Vehicle Miles Traveled” in Phoenix skew dramatically to more miles on smaller streets, while L.A. concentrates more travel on its freeway system.<sup>7</sup>

This doesn’t mean that Pulliam was right – that we should never have built freeways. It shows that surface streets have served Phoenix well. As gasoline becomes more expensive and vehicles smaller, this advantage may well increase. Congestion is getting worse in this region and that is a problem, but Phoenix is a long way from being “another L.A.” now.



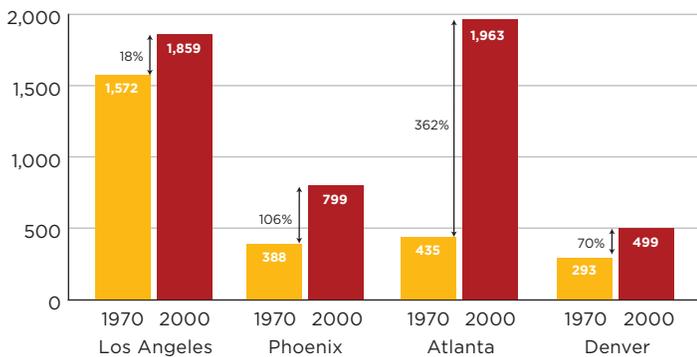
**Sprawl**

William Whyte popularized the term “urban sprawl” in his 1958 book, *The Exploding Metropolis*. The phrase has come to mean low-density, automobile-oriented, leapfrogging development spread along streets and boulevards at the edge of urban areas, often resulting in the redistribution of an older, denser, pedestrian-oriented city into suburban patterns. Innumerable commentators see sprawl as an indictment of all that is wrong with America. Phoenix is certainly perceived as a culprit in the pathology of sprawl, but Los Angeles is the criminal mastermind.

Phoenix is certainly perceived as a culprit in the pathology of sprawl, but Los Angeles is the criminal mastermind.

**DENSITY DIFFERS AMONG OFTEN-COMPARED REGIONS**

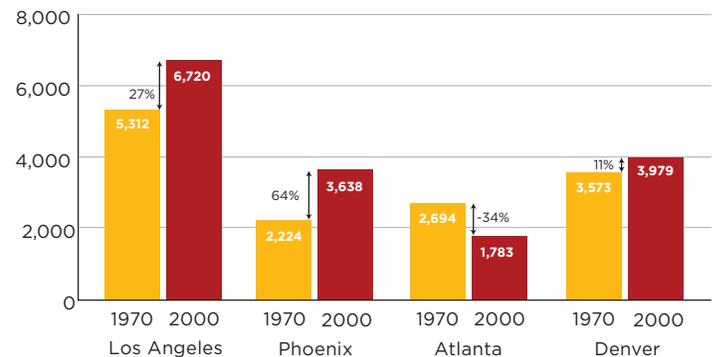
*Square Miles, Percent Change of Urbanized Area, 1970 and 2000*



Source: *US Urbanized Areas 1950-1990* and *USA Urbanized Areas Over 500,000, 2000 and 1990 Comparability*, Demographia, 2001.

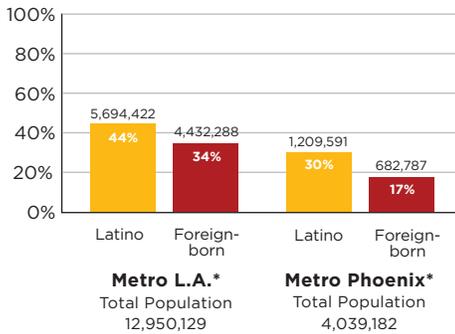
**PHOENIX INCREASED IN DENSITY MORE THAN LOS ANGELES**

*Population Density, Percent Change per Square Mile, 1970 and 2000*



Source: *US Urbanized Areas 1950-1990* and *USA Urbanized Areas Over 500,000, 2000 and 1990 Comparability*, Demographia, 2001.

## METRO LOS ANGELES OUTPACES METRO PHOENIX IN THE NUMBER OF RESIDENTS AND IMMIGRANTS



\* U.S. Census Metropolitan Statistical Area

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey.

Phoenix and Los Angeles are among the nation's geographically largest cities. But city limits are a fairly meaningless measurement of jurisdictional reach. A fairer way of comparing metropolitan areas is to use the U.S. Census definition of "urbanized area."<sup>8</sup> This measure estimates the geographic size of a place, which is populated at urban level densities. From this perspective, L.A. and Phoenix are still big, but areas such as Atlanta have spread out more.

So L.A. is geographically big, and Phoenix has been spreading out, but neither city is declining in density. In fact, L.A. ranks as one of the densest, and by some measures the densest, metro area in the U.S., according to the Metropolitan Policy Program at The Brookings Institution. In 2000, Phoenix placed in the middle of American metro regions and is moving steadily higher.

L.A. seems different than New York or Chicago because it doesn't have the extremely high residential densities in its downtown area that older, pre-auto cities developed. Los Angeles' relatively high average density is spread all over its urban area, and its average is the result of a narrower range of lifestyles than is true of older cities.

In this respect, Phoenix is similar to Los Angeles, though much less dense. Phoenix and Los Angeles are fairly viewed as examples of postwar auto-dominated urban forms. But both are also increasingly recognized as examples of "dense sprawl" where smaller lots, townhomes, and condos are built in an expanding urban area. This entire pattern was the result of growth that occurred in the era when automobiles made virtually all parts of town equally accessible. The dense cores of older cities had a pedestrian character because they had to. Now, L.A., and Phoenix, are developing more transit and pedestrian-friendly areas.

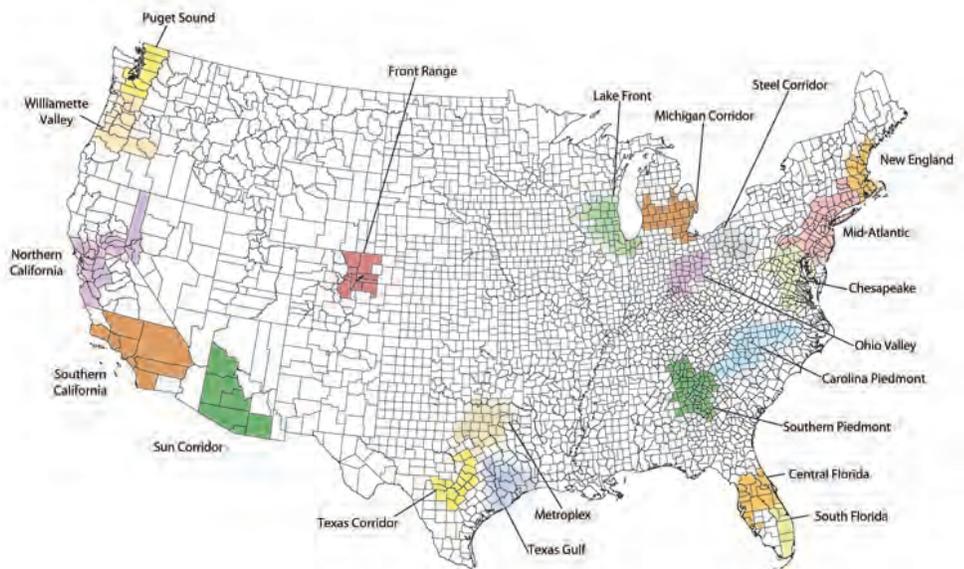
As the United States organizes itself into "megapolitan" regions, Arizona's Sun Corridor will likely come to feel more like Southern California than it does today. Density in the Sun Corridor will continue to increase because of fuel and housing prices and changing lifestyle choices. But the existing urban fabric of metro Phoenix will remain in place, and the region will continue to seem low in density compared to some other places. In the emerging megapolitan era, views of "sprawl" likely will become more sophisticated and less dominated by nostalgia.

## WHAT IS A MEGAPOLITAN?

Special characteristics distinguish these places:

- **COMPACT** 2 or more metropolitan areas with principal anchor cities 50-200 miles apart. Population of at least 5 million by 2040.
- **CONNECTED** Census-defined employment interchange measure (EIM) of 15% by 2040. EIM refers to commuting patterns and is often a measure of "interconnectedness."
- **COMPLEX** Megapolitans and metros make megaregions. Virginia Tech's Metropolitan Institute identified 20 U.S. megapolitans and 10 megaregions.
- **CORRIDOR** Urban form, often linear with multiple centers.

## ARIZONA'S SUN CORRIDOR IS PART OF THE MEGAPOLITAN NATION TAKING SHAPE



Source: Metropolitan Institute at Virginia Tech Alexandria.

## The Bottom Line

So has Phoenix become “another L.A.?” By these measures, there is continuing cause for concern about air quality. On congestion, Phoenix isn’t really even close to L.A., and transportation is about to undergo another major revolution. The Sun Corridor will continue to become denser, but probably will not catch SoCal, and neither place will transform itself into a 19th century urban form.

By some other measures, Phoenix should be so lucky as to become L.A.

- L.A.’s per capita income is 24% higher than Phoenix’.
- L.A. is home to 38 Fortune 1000 companies, while Phoenix has nine.
- L.A. ranks 12th on Richard Florida’s creative class index; Phoenix is 19th.

But the mantra continues. As recently as June 26, 2008, *The Arizona Republic* quoted Valley Forward’s Diane Brossart: “People know what they *don’t* want to be. They don’t want to be L.A.”<sup>9</sup>

Clearly, there is a serious lesson in this persistent refrain. As Gregory Rodriguez’ earlier quote points out, the ultimate issue is that the City of Angels is to many people the city that fell from grace. It was billed as the place where success and quality of life could co-exist, but there was no way for reality to live up to the hype. Phoenix is a similarly aspirational city. But Phoenix’s image has never soared as high as its big sister’s. Phoenix never promised to be heaven on earth. Maybe we can avoid L.A.’s negative image by lowered hype alone. If we could figure out a “hype/reality index,” that would be a statistic worth tracking.

But the conclusions of this comparison cannot be to keep municipal aspirations modest or to pretend that all is well because we have not sunk as low as Los Angeles. There are other lessons too, including the close ties among smog, congestion, and sprawl.

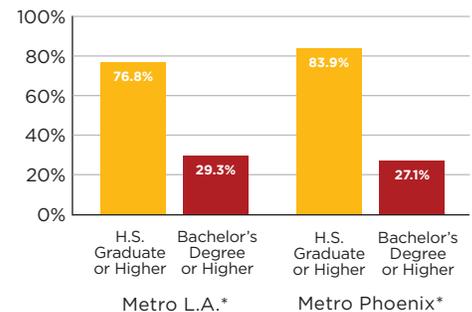
- Metro Phoenix is currently about half the geographic size of metro L.A. As our area continues to build, we have to do a better job of reducing congestion for direct benefits as well as for air quality and community life.. Phoenix should be at an advantage: the end of cheap oil is at hand, so different transportation options and reduced commuting must be part of the future. And current market pressures will force changes.
- Similarly, Phoenix is about half as dense as Los Angeles. This too must change in an era of concern over carbon footprints, livability, and energy. We have to increase densities for affordability, air quality, and less time in traffic. As the urban fabric begins to change, we must create distinctive places that get better, rather than decline, over time.
- L.A. is one of the world’s great cultural centers. Phoenix is not that now, but is looking for the aspects of urban existence at which we can truly be great. Surely, we can find many things in our long heritage and selection of unique institutions.
- Phoenix and L.A. came of age in the automobile era. But we will have to figure our how to move gracefully to the next age with integrated solutions to the ever-connected problems of smog, congestion, and sprawl.

Probably no metropolis has been more loved or more hated than Los Angeles. Everyone has an opinion, and it is strongly held. Opinions about Phoenix have some of the same polarity, but much less of the intensity. Those opinions are still, like our city itself, malleable. But shaping the city and its image must be more than reciting what we “don’t want to be.”

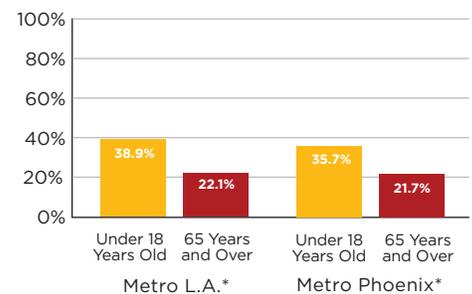


## DID YOU KNOW...

### Educational Attainment, Population 25 Years and Older



### Households with One or More People of Selected Age Ranges



\* U.S. Census Metropolitan Statistical Area.

Source: U.S. Census Bureau, 2006 American Community Survey.

## Take Action

### HERE'S THE TASK: STOP SAYING "NOT L.A." AND START COMING UP WITH A NEW SHORTHAND

What is the catchphrase for what Phoenix wants to be? Send your suggestions to [morrison.institute@asu.edu](mailto:morrison.institute@asu.edu). A variety of responses will be posted to the Morrison Institute Web site.



"Not L.A." has been a convenient shorthand in Phoenix for 25 years or more. Yet, that mantra has not produced an agenda for making this a better city. "Don't wants" never turn into action. Unfortunately, we haven't had the same simple shorthand for what we do want to be.

But, whenever metro Phoenix residents gather to talk about what they want from their community, the results are remarkably consistent: quality jobs, affordable housing, and continued access to the scenery and outdoor lifestyle that attracted them to Arizona. They want schools and neighborhoods that work in distinctive places with things to do and places to go. They want choices to be able to get out of their cars. They want efficient government and community groups to bridge the gap between the "haves" and "have nots." They want a competitive economy and housing capable of keeping their kids in town after college. They want to see revitalization in places that are down at the heels.

How then do we quickly and clearly express what we agree on? The answer is not to use another place as a bogey, but to recognize that what we want is "to be Phoenix," and to get on with the business of making a better, more livable city.

- 1 Rodriguez, Gregory, "Picturing Paradise," *Los Angeles Times*, June 23, 2008.
- 2 "Boxer decries 'outrageous' EPA emissions decision," *Los Angeles Times*, January 11, 2008.
- 3 *Metropolitan Statistical Area Trends, Air Quality Trends by City 1990-2006*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, [www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa\\_allpoll\\_23aug07.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa_allpoll_23aug07.pdf).
- 4 *Metropolitan Statistical Area Trends, Air Quality Trends by City 1990-2006*, U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, [www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa\\_allpoll\\_23aug07.pdf](http://www.epa.gov/airtrends/pdfs/msa_allpoll_23aug07.pdf).
- 5 Schrank, David and Tim Lomax, *The 2007 Urban Mobility Report*, Texas Transportation Institute, September 2007.
- 6 *The 2007 Urban Mobility Report*, Texas Transportation Institute, September 2007.
- 7 *The 2007 Urban Mobility Report*, Texas Transportation Institute, September 2007. This is changing however, see table "Phoenix Is Catching Up in Freeway Use" on page 4 of Forum 411.
- 8 For Census 2000, the Census Bureau classifies as "urban" all territory, population, and housing units located within an urbanized area (UA) or an urban cluster (UC). It delineates UA and UC boundaries to encompass densely settled territory, which consists of: core census block groups or blocks that have a population density of at least 1,000 people per square mile and surrounding census blocks that have an overall density of at least 500 people per square mile. In addition, under certain conditions, less densely settled territory may be part of each UA or UC.
- 9 "In their own words: Diane Brossart," *The Arizona Republic*, June 26, 2008.

SEPTEMBER 2008 | EDITION 1 | ISSUE 2

# FORUM 411

Engaging Arizona's Leaders

FORUM 411 IS PRESENTED BY

**westcor**

THEIR SUPPORT FOR THIS PROJECT IS ACKNOWLEDGED GRATEFULLY.

Morrison Institute for Public Policy conducts research that informs, assists, and advises Arizona leaders and residents who shape public policy. Morrison Institute was established in 1982 through a grant from Marvin and June Morrison of Gilbert, Arizona.

© 2008 by the Arizona Board of Regents for and on behalf of Arizona State University and its Morrison Institute for Public Policy.

MORRISON INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY  
School of Public Affairs / College of Public Programs / Arizona State University  
Mail Code: 4220, 411 N Central Ave, Ste 900, Phoenix, AZ 85004-0692  
Phone 602-496-0900 / Fax 602-496-0964

Visit [www.morrisoninstitute.org](http://www.morrisoninstitute.org) for more information on Forum 411 topics and past issues in the series.



Printed on Mohawk Via Satin by Prisma Graphic, Phoenix Arizona.