

## **Phoenix History: 2001 through Today**

**By Jessica Scott**

Phoenix has always had an entrepreneurial spirit, even from its early days of settlers coming here for the prospect of land and development. This mindset has recently lent itself to more transitional residents in modern times. A transitional population does not lend itself to a lot of community-building efforts and establishment. “Snowbirds” are a population unique to Phoenix and other areas in the Sunbelt. These residents typically own property here but do not live here full time; they often use their Phoenix homes as winter homes. An economic disadvantage includes the fact that houses are often left empty for a majority of the year, resulting in a reduction of tax money spent in Phoenix as compared with full-time residents.

This transitional nature has been brought on by many factors though, of which low home prices have played a huge roll. Early in the 2000s Phoenix was booming. Families, young people, and immigrants were moving to Phoenix for opportunities that were present at the time. Housing was affordable and people were earning more than they were in the 1990s. The sprawling nature of the Phoenix kept most people working and the houses here were being built faster than they ever were before, and in large quantities. Developers were not considering the future as much as they should have and new “communities” actually lacked a lot of crucial aspects that make a community successful and vibrant. All things considered, a strong sense of “community” has not existed in Phoenix in recent years, and the sprawling nature of Phoenix has recently been brought to the forefront of conversations regarding the future.

With all the new development came the construction of big-box stores on every corner. Key players in Phoenix’s recent “shop local” and downtown revitalization movements, such as

Kimber Lanning, were not blind to the types of development that was taking over Phoenix in the early 2000s. New organizations such as Local First identified these problems and made it their mission to start counteracting these trends. During this time of personal gain and development Phoenix residents were often very self-centered, not really seeing the need to direct attention to issues that concerned the greater good. This type of attitude was probably encouraged by the lack of civic engagement in “cookie cutter” developments, long transit times for employment and the business-oriented mindset due to the thriving economy. Despite these factors, when Mayor Phil Gordon was elected in 2004 he brought the issue of downtown revitalization and community-building to the forefront. Other organizations such as Downtown Voices were starting to form at this time as well. It was an important time for community-based organizations to gain traction and involvement while the economy was still stable and people were comfortable with their lifestyles while housing prices were on the rise.

ASU’s downtown campus opened in 2008 and classes started that August in hopes to create “one university in many places.” The opening of this campus posed many concerns about student safety in the downtown Phoenix area and what kind of development was happening. These concerns led to conversations about new development and economic stimulus in downtown Phoenix and without the addition of the downtown campus these conversations wouldn’t have had as much traction. Concurrently, Local First was really starting to come into the public eye as a reputable organization and started hunkering down for promotion of local shopping. Their mission was starting to have power at this time because people were starting to see what kind of a positive impact shopping local and other activities could have for Arizona redevelopment in the future.

Things started to change substantially in 2008 with the economic downturn, or Great Recession. As the unstable economy started to tip, people were left with houses that were underwater, a distrust in the government followed, and many were displaced and forced to rethink about how they were living.

2009 marked the lowest point of the Great Recession. People were beginning to realize their previous ways of living were unsustainable and that living well within, and potentially under, their means was going to be necessary. It was at this time sprawl started to become a prevalent issue in the mind of the public also. Transit was becoming unaffordable with his gas prices and when many people lost their jobs they were starting to realize how expensive an automobile-oriented way of life really was. Even though the downturn was devastating for many it presented a lot of opportunity in Phoenix, and it was with this staggering halt in the economy that people started thinking in a more community-based way. Green initiatives started to emerge at this time as well; solar power was a major conversation within Phoenix and the terms “sustainability” and “community” were starting to become dominant in conversations regarding Phoenix’s future.

In 2010, Arizona was in the spotlight for its SB-1070 bill that dealt with issues of immigration. Just as people were starting to come together after the economic devastation SB-1070 caused a great divide in Arizona and also in the nation. Issues of immigration were becoming everyday news stories and a people were starting to protest in opposition to the bill. The Hispanic community took a big hit in this process and many people were starting to leave Arizona in fear of being deported. If Arizona’s economy wasn’t struggling enough, it was certainly not benefitting from a great population loss. Despite the problems that Arizona was facing, progress on downtown Phoenix revitalization continued with more local pubs, destination

spaces and retail shops for visitors. The number of people interested in downtown revitalization was growing and there was a fixed core of people who were starting to make things happen. In 2012, Greg Stanton was elected mayor of Phoenix was embracing higher education opportunities including the opening of the Phoenix Biomedical Campus.

Today, the idea of “community” is starting to become better known and also is changing every day. There is still a wealth of opportunity for Downtown Phoenix to develop and become more cohesive components. Issues of social capital are starting to surface also and its importance to a diverse economy are starting to be emphasized. Phoenix has historically had a lot of built capital and times of good financial capital but has lacked in welcoming grassroots city participation for community development initiatives at a broader level. Communities are starting to value broader participation, such as contributions from neighborhood associations. All of the recent changes and the way things were left after the recession left us in a very vulnerable but exciting position to head into the future.

### ***A description of community building and what civic life was like in Phoenix***

2000 to today has been a very transitional time for Phoenix and its residents. As mentioned above there were times of wealth and prosperity and times of great devastation and loss. Civic life has changed considerable since 2000, going from relatively low civic engagement to a conversation about the benefits of civic engagement and how it is important for the community to survive and develop.

### ***A description of the built environment***

Building off of all of the development that was taking place in the 1990s, Phoenix was expanding at a rapid rate. The core of Phoenix was making its way out of the dilapidated state it was in and people were flocking here for the relatively low home prices. The built environment was losing some of its 1950s and 1960s charm and turning more to the quickly built stucco construction. Big box stores such as Walmart, Target, Staples, OfficeMax, Home Depot and Lowe's were becoming the dominant places for people to spend their money while mom-and-pop shops started to struggle.

Phoenix's downtown area was starting to gain attention for its efforts of cleaning up the downtown. The new downtown ASU campus brought a lot of positive attributes to the area as well, combining the long-lived history of government and legal work together with a new population of students.

### ***A description of major community assets***

Phoenix had times of great financial capital and times of almost no financial capital due to the intense rise and fall of housing prices. Again, with the implementation of SB-1070 people were divided so political capital was on the fence. The supporters of the bill were very involved and supportive of the efforts while the people who opposed it were registering to vote against it. At this time there were some pivotal conversations happening though, so even though some of the discussions were not as civil as they could have been people were starting to talk and share ideas- an increase in social capital. It was in this time period that dialogues about energy (environmental capital) started switching to green practices and "sustainable" types of production.

*A description of major community challenges of the time period*

Overall, the challenges that faced Phoenix in its recent history were issues of civic engagement, financial devastation and racial inequality. These are all very modern issues that places outside of Phoenix are starting to deal with also and with time and the right people starting civil and informative conversations people will start to be able to envision a better Phoenix for the future. The biggest challenge that faces Phoenix now is giving it a new and fresh identity, how communities start to involve themselves will be crucial in this development.