

State-trust-land sales raise concerns

Town Hall participants adopt strategies to handle ongoing development

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State-trust-land reform was the top priority of an Arizona Town Hall that brought together 150 leaders from around the state to discuss solutions to unbridled growth.

Voter-approved changes to the 96-year-old system used to sell the state's 9 million acres of public lands would allow managed growth around booming urban cores, the Town Hall found.

"I was happy to see among all these groups a consensus that something has to change," said Jamie Hogue, deputy state-land commissioner.

Hogue said that an initiative being crafted by Gov. Janet Napolitano and state legislators could be the key to allowing Arizona to raise school funds with land sales while still "preserving our unique open spaces."

Hogue and other participants of the Town Hall, which was held in October at the Grand Canyon, spoke at the Mayor/City Council breakfast recently in Scottsdale.

Mayor Mary Macors sponsored the event to explain the Town Hall process to residents and to discuss growth and land-use planning, the latest topic for the gathering.

Town Hall President Tara Jackson said the event brings together leaders with diverging opinions from around the state to discuss and reach consensus on a given issue.

The group then issued a detailed report on its findings.

Jackson described the process as a "think tank" and said that the topic of state-trust-land reform led to intense debate.

"This was the best chance either to start World War III or find a great solution," she said. "We found a great solution."

The state has problems with the timely sale of state lands because of an underfunded Arizona State Land Department, a lack of planning tools to work with communities and little means to set land aside for conservation, according to the report.

As a result, development around cities "leapfrogs" across state land to reach private property, straining the infrastructure for water and transportation.

The Town Hall urged the state and cities to engage in public-private partnerships, strengthen oversight of unplanned development and collaborate on a regional basis.

Yvonne Hunter, a public-affairs representative for Arizona Public Service Co., said that utilities also play a role in land development and preservation because power must reach new housing and commercial centers.

Tom Largo, a council member of the Salt River Pima-Maricopa Indian Community, said the Town Hall opened his eyes to the importance of working closely with cities and the state.

"Sometimes we think of ourselves as a sovereign community and only think about issues that affect us," Largo said of the Salt River community.

"But on any issue, if we are not at the table, we won't know what's on the mind of the population as a whole."

Residents who attended the breakfast said they would like to see the cities and state concentrate on developing solar power and figure out how the growing state will accommodate the demand for water.

Manross said that all of these concerns have to be factored in to future land-use debates.

"I don't believe that preserving land and our awesome environment means not growing," Manross said.

"It just means we have to be thoughtful about how we grow."