

March 25, 2015

LAI Keynote: History of Phoenix - Can it Predict the Future?

Have you ever been looked at as if you had a 3rd eye while attending a national conference meeting and you reveal that your home is Phoenix? If so, you should have heard Grady Gammage Jr. give ample ammunition to articulate why Phoenix is above average (not only in summer heat). At the March 25th Lambda Alpha International (LAI) meeting, which took place at the Arizona Country Club, Mr. Gammage was both entertaining and informative. During Mr. Gammage's extemporaneous and animated presentation, attendees learned not only how Phoenix evolved post WWII, but also were armed with some ammunition to defend Phoenix against its critics.



According to Mr. Gammage, several major factors that shaped modern Phoenix's current attributes are:

Automobiles

Phoenix's major development as a city was during the post WWII automobile age, when Phoenicians weren't required to live within walking distance of their workplace or a street car line.

Railroad

Although rail spurs connect to Phoenix, Phoenix is not located on a major rail line. Cities that developed along a major rail line tended to be built around the commerce that arises from people and goods carried by the passing trains.

Water

In places where groundwater is abundant and conveniently accessible, it is not uncommon to see houses on large lots or farms spread throughout the state (think: Illinois). In Phoenix and its surrounding cities, however, water has to be delivered to homes and businesses from elsewhere via major infrastructure projects such as the Salt River Project and Central Arizona Project. Thus, when flying into the valley, you see undeveloped desert give way abruptly to reasonably dense development, with little to no buffer of rural housing.

Air Travel Hub

What is now Sky Harbor International Airport made Phoenix easily accessible to national and international travelers.



Mr. Gammage shared several facts that he has used to respond to common criticisms regarding Phoenix as "unsustainable," "too hot" or "too sprawly."

- The Phoenix Active Management Area (AMA) has "banked" five years of water supply underground. Compare with Atlanta, which at one point during the summer a few years ago had only 28 days of fresh water supply remaining.
- Arizona's household greenhouse gas emissions are the 45th lowest out of the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Phoenix's household emissions are lower than Washington DC, Houston and Atlanta, and are 25% below the national average.
- Phoenix is 39th out of the 50 largest cities in the United States in traffic congestion—lower than Honolulu, Seattle, Austin, Portland, Chicago, Los Angeles and even Denver.
- Phoenix is uniformly dense, which makes it unusual compared to other cities of its size.
- Although Phoenix may not be known for the number of Fortune 500 companies headquartered here, it has a more diverse economy than many other cities of its size—including Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia and San Francisco.

In summary, Mr. Gammage gave a lucid history of how our beloved Phoenix has evolved as a city, as well as gave a hint as to some of the challenges that lay ahead of us. What is for sure is that those who attended the event now have ample ammunition to defend our honor and can stand up, unashamed, to Phoenix's critics who attend national conventions (or at least feel superior to them when they criticize Phoenix for the wrong reasons).

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