

Phoenix takes big step toward Scottsdale-style canals, but residents wonder

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Arizona Republic

Published 7:32 a.m. MT Sept. 18, 2023 | Updated 7:43 a.m. MT Sept. 18, 2023

Picture a canal. Scottsdale has the waterfront, Venice romantic gondolas. Amsterdam is synonymous with canals. In Bruges, they made a movie that featured them. Even San Antonio has a must-see entertainment district on its canal.

Now, decades after Phoenix's canals were built, the city wants in on the act. Mayor Kate Gallego touts how the city has 180 miles of canals compared to Amsterdam's 60.

Phoenix officials have spent years trying to bring their vision of a "Grand Canalscape" to reality, and earlier this month they took a major step toward bringing it to fruition.

The City Council approved a mixed-use project on Sept. 6 for a canal corridor that has apartments seven stories high with a restaurant on the ground level.

Residents believe the project will set the stage for years to come.

While some are ecstatic over what they believe is a groundbreaking project that will reshape the community for the better, others are concerned it isn't grand enough, given its prime spot along Central Avenue.

Concerned residents say the project lacks placemaking and amenities. The development is decent, they contend, but they question whether it lives up to the vision the city and community members spent years planning. Most importantly, they fear errors by the council now could doom future developments along the canal and Phoenix's main street.

The Grand Canalscape dream has been years in the making, but it took off in 2015 when Phoenix was awarded two grants from the federal government to transform the pathways into thriving transportation corridors. It started with pavement and lighting, plus signals to help pedestrians cross intersections.

At completion, high-rise apartments, parks, restaurants with patios overlooking the water and other canal-front developments are envisioned. A sense of community that fosters connectedness is the ultimate goal.

City Councilmembers downplayed the residents' concerns at this month's public meeting, saying the project, called Forty600, may not meet every demand residents have but that the city was working diligently to ensure walkable, vibrant areas that foster connection and community.

If council members are right, this project next to a light rail stop could serve as the catalyst that transforms midtown Phoenix into an urban haven. It should attract thousands more residents to the area, lead to more public transit use, and thoughtfully balance open community space with residential, restaurant and retail areas. Other developments should also flock to the canal.

But if some of the residents' concerns materialize, then the project could lead to an underwhelming corridor that fails to live up to its potential.

Councilwoman Laura Pastor, who represents the district where Forty600 is planned, encouraged residents to look at the project in the context of the larger canal and Central Avenue corridor. There is so much to celebrate, she said, including planned canal projects at Third Avenue and Seventh Street.

Mayor Kate Gallego told The Arizona Republic she felt confident the overwhelming majority of surrounding neighbors were excited about the project, and she was proud to be part of the unanimous approval by the council.

The approval OK'd a rezoning request that allows the developer, RAS Developments, to build a taller building than the city originally envisioned and means the project is essentially full-speed ahead.

The zoning attorney for the project, Benjamin Tate, said construction should take about 18 months and will begin after the City Council approves the final site plan. That could be in the

next four to six months, although delays are possible, Tate added.

Residents now have little more to do than simply wait and see how it all turns out.

The Grand Canalscape: A years-in-the-making plan

The Grand Canalscape is a recreational trail along the Grand Canal that includes paved sidewalks, lighting and pedestrian and cyclist signalized crossings. It stretches 12 miles across the Valley from Phoenix to Tempe, and eventually the enhancements are supposed to extend west to Glendale. Lined with paved walkways, the corridor has become a go-to path for Phoenix walkers and cyclists.

But for years, city officials have dreamt of turning the canal into something more, into a major community focal point and not just a utility — the same way Scottsdale did.

Inspired by the San Antonio River Walk, Scottsdale officials decided to harness the Arizona Canal to help connect Fashion Square Mall and the Fifth Avenue District. They wanted a downtown renaissance.

City planners launched a plan in 1991 that paved the way for landscaped footpaths and canal-oriented restaurants, shops, office space and apartments. Today, the city uses the canal and Scottsdale Waterfront to host Canal Convergence, a popular multi-day art installation that attracts thousands every fall.

On the weekends, crowds flock to the area for its active nightlife scene, attractive restaurants and romantic strolls along the water. Families, friends and couples can often be spotted taking photos on the canal bridge.

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The lofty "Grand Canalscape" vision went hand-in-hand with the city's even bigger dream to "Reinvent PHX."

Reinvent PHX was launched in 2012 as an initiative to bring investment to Phoenix and foster a walkable place to live, rich with opportunity. The effort led to new policies meant to

encourage public transit use and pedestrian-friendly areas, called "Transit Oriented Development" and the "Walkable Urban Code."

For three years, the city and community members drafted action plans to make their dreams a reality, according to Phoenix's website.

Those action plans were repeatedly referenced by a handful of concerned residents at the City Council meeting, saying much hinges on its success because it will set the standard for other canal developers going forward.

What's planned at Forty600

Neighbors want high-rise buildings with ground-floor coffee shops, boutiques, restaurants and bodegas along the Grand Canal. They want parks and shade, too.

Along Central Avenue, residents like Ken Waters, who appealed to the City Council at the hearing, want shops and excitement that evoke a Main Street, USA, nostalgia.

Forty600 is a seven-story apartment complex that will take the place of the former Hinkley's Lighting store south of Coolidge Street on Central Avenue and across the street from Brophy High School.

The 155 apartments will be on floors two through seven, while the ground floor will be commercial space.

The site plan, which is preliminary and could change, shows a restaurant and patio space and four live-work units abutting the canal and one storefront along Central Avenue. The live-work spaces are two-story apartments where the renter must live on the second floor and use the first floor as an office, Tate, the zoning attorney, told The Republic. The units come with private patios facing the canal.

Another storefront is proposed for Coolidge Street, but Tate said that will likely be office space.

A lobby, maintenance storage room and a bike storage room for renters would also line Coolidge Street. The apartment leasing office is along Central Avenue.

Tate, in his testimony to the City Council, said the project was one he was particularly excited for, given he grew up in the area. It was the sort of project that inspired him to become a zoning attorney, he noted.

The concerns: not enough patio space, storefronts

Residents with concerns take issue with the patio space they say is too small and quibble with the amount of ground-level space the public can't access.

And since the council approved the project's rezoning request, neighbors worry the council has given too much wiggle room to the developer.

Too much flexibility, in their view, could lead to tall glass-window buildings with more private space than public, with few restaurants and shops and even fewer patios, leading to crowding that impedes the walking path and creates discomfort and potentially danger.

"Phoenix is blowing its opportunity," Waters told The Republic. In his view, the city should be demanding more of developers who get to profit off of proximity to city services, such as light rail.

The projects are transit-adjacent, Water said, but not necessarily transit-oriented. In other words, the projects get way more than they give.

He pointed to a rendering from the city's Uptown Transit Oriented Development policy, which shows a massive restaurant patio.

"This is what we want. ... We're getting short-shifted," Waters said, gesturing to the city rendering. "There's basically no patio on the Canalscape, and that's ridiculous. It's the Canalscape," Waters said.

Regarding the Central Avenue side of the building, Waters said, "They're putting these leasing offices and ... whatnot on the front, and that's our Main Street, USA, drag there. We want to put retail out there, and we can easily do this."

Another resident, Kristin Lisson, said, "Walkability to me is about being able to walk to something that actually provides something I can purchase. A grocery store. a coffee shop."

Tate, the attorney for Forty600, said the patio space should fit 50 customers — a decent amount, given the developer views the restaurant as a grab-n-go style cafe, Tate told The Republic. At 736 square feet, Tate said the patio would be nearly 85 feet long and up to 10 feet wide.

He added that while development standards require a minimum of 2,000 square feet of commercial space that the public can access on the ground floor, Forty600 is slated to have much more. The restaurant alone is approximately 2,500 square feet, Tate said. The storefront along Central Avenue would mean even more.

The site plan, however, could change. If the developer comes to believe a storefront on Central Avenue is not viable, the developers would be within their legal rights to use that space for other purposes, since the restaurant alone satisfies the requirement, Tate said.

Residents like Waters say the spirit of the Uptown Transit Oriented Development plan is obvious: They want publicly accessible commercial spaces where members of the community can walk to and where they can do things.

Leasing offices and live-work units with private patios for residents don't satisfy that goal, in their view.

The city is failing to deliver on that plan, Waters said.

Council: It's about more than one project, more than just storefronts

Councilwoman Pastor, who has represented the Uptown area for nearly a decade and whose father, the late Congressman Ed Pastor, played a role in the creation of Transit Oriented Development plans, was adamant at the hearing that Forty600 and other projects would advance the community's goals.

Pastor stressed that she understood the value of the canals and was pushing actively behind the scenes to bring the full vision to fruition.

One element that could improve the perception of Forty600 is a \$250,000 donation from the developer for Grand Canalscape improvements.

That might mean additional shade structures, public art and a gateway arch, according to planning documents.

But part of the challenge, Pastor told The Republic, is that developing the canal requires coordination between the city, private developers, the utility company and even the federal government. The canals are operated by Salt River Project, but the land is owned by the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation.

SRP has to ensure any enhancements or developments proposed won't impede its ability to access the canals for maintenance. The company needs "an unobstructed, drivable path that accommodates our larger equipment," said SRP spokesperson Patty Likens.

And while Phoenix has an agreement with SRP for the general Grand Canalscape, Pastor said, the city has to enter additional agreements with the utility for each individual development that comes about.

Pastor, at the public meeting, said she was pushing SRP by pointing out how the utility worked with Scottsdale.

"The Grand Canal throughout our whole city is a charming piece that we need to activate," Pastor said at the meeting. "I went to Scottsdale Promenade and ... walked that canal. I pushed SRP to really get them to activate. If Scottsdale can activate, we can activate."

She also pointed to two other nearby developments, saying they'd help generate buzz about and ambiance at the Canalscape: Aura Uptown, an apartment complex alongside the canal at Third Avenue, and McKenzie's Midtown Tavern, a neighborhood bar, at Seventh Street.

The tavern, Pastor explained, is in the nascent stages of expanding into a lot that fronts the canal. She has been firm in conversations with the owners that they need to get neighborhood buy-in and they must incorporate the canal into their plans, she said.

The result? The bar wants to open a pickleball court, Pastor said.

"They listened, and it's moving, and it's going to happen," Pastor said at the meeting. "It's going to be nice to have a pickleball space on the canal. It's going to be nice to be able to park our bikes there. It's going to be nice to see people outside using the canal and be able to ride their bike and stop and have something to eat or meet people. That's going to be nice!"

Councilwoman Debra Stark also weighed in, saying she never viewed the transit-oriented development plans as rigid mandates that all ground-level space must be shops. Instead, she said, it's about creating a general sense of community and a feeling of belonging.

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