

Leadership conference tackles Valley growth

Keynote speaker from Arizona says Boise still has time to learn from the example of Phoenix

Cynthia Sewell

The Idaho Statesman | Edition Date: 05-02-2006

SUN VALLEY — Treasure Valley government and business leaders took a look forward and a look back at the region Monday, the first day of the 13th annual Boise Metro Leadership conference in Sun Valley.

For the past five years, and again this year, growth is the key topic at the conference which concludes today.

Keynote speaker Grady Gammage, a senior research fellow at the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University, told the more than 160 conference attendees that Phoenix and Boise have many similarities: Both are arid, state capitols and rapidly growing, dominant urban centers in conservative states with economic origins in agriculture and mining.

But there are a couple of marked differences between the Treasure Valley and the Valley of the Sun.

The Phoenix area, with a population of more than 3 million, has consumed nearly all of its farm land and is now eating into its desert and foothills, while the Boise metro area, with a population of about 600,000 — and projected to reach 1 million by 2030 — still has farm land and open space and is in a position to make public policy decisions to guide its future growth.

"You are far enough behind Phoenix that you need to ask yourself if raw population growth is the measure of success," Gammage said.

Phoenix has just started to question whether encouraging people to move there is good public policy.

Some of the Treasure Valley's most transformational decisions were not made by politicians, but by the private sector, said Bill Russell, director of Northwest Nazarene University's MBA program.

What would the Valley be like today if the Simplot, Morrison and Albertson families or Boise Cascade or Micron, had chosen to take their fledgling businesses to another city or state, he asked.

"They built a company, built it big. ... but kept it here," Russell said. "No elected official, no politic body, can make this type of decision."

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, public leaders and planners were unwavering in their decision to build a regional mall in Downtown Boise, Russell recounted. But no national retailers would come on board unless JC Penney or Sears agreed to anchor the mall.

Both mega-retailers refused to commit to the Downtown mall, but were amenable to a west Boise location,

now Boise Towne Square. Public officials and planners were unprepared for the rapid growth and traffic that Boise Towne Square brought to West Boise.

"We overreached our decision power," Russell said. "Sometimes our decisions have to fit the reality of the outside world."

The idea for Blueprint for Good Growth, a long-range land use and transportation plan for Ada County, was birthed at this conference two years ago. A draft of the \$819,000 plan was to have been completed two months ago, but planners are still struggling with several key issues, including rural development.

Boise Mayor Dave Bieter took heed of the Phoenix example and Gammage's advice to think carefully about public policy.

"Somehow we think we can outrun growth. We cannot," Bieter said. "We have to take a different path. Blueprint for Good Growth is that path."

The Treasure Valley could not exist at its current capacity if it weren't for some visionary decisions made one century ago to fix the Boise River irrigation canals and build reservoirs, enabling residents to grow crops in the desert and create a thriving economy, Idaho historian Susan Stacy said.

Also in the 1980s, a task force on Idaho higher education made three major recommendations: create a statewide community college system, organize a single-system higher education system under a chancellor, and give each institution a unique role and mission, said four-term Idaho State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jerry Evans.

Twenty years later, "When you analyze the bottom line, nothing has changed," Evans said. The Valley and state are still struggling because these choices were not implemented.