

MAG Celebrates Golden Anniversary

Decade Two: 1977-1987

50th
Anniversary



April 12, 2017, will mark 50 years that the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) has been serving the region. This is the second part of a five-part series that covers the five decades of MAG and the major milestones that represent how MAG has made a difference to the residents of our region.

Transportation

The raging controversy over the Papago Freeway Inner Loop design, which had led to a defeat by voters of an “advisory referendum” in 1973, had left MAG transportation planners reeling. A voracious campaign by the state’s largest newspaper against the freeway seemed insurmountable.

“They just pounded (us) editorially, and they wound up killing that freeway,” says former MAG Staff Coordinator Ken Driggs of the newspaper’s role. “It put us in a very controversial position.”

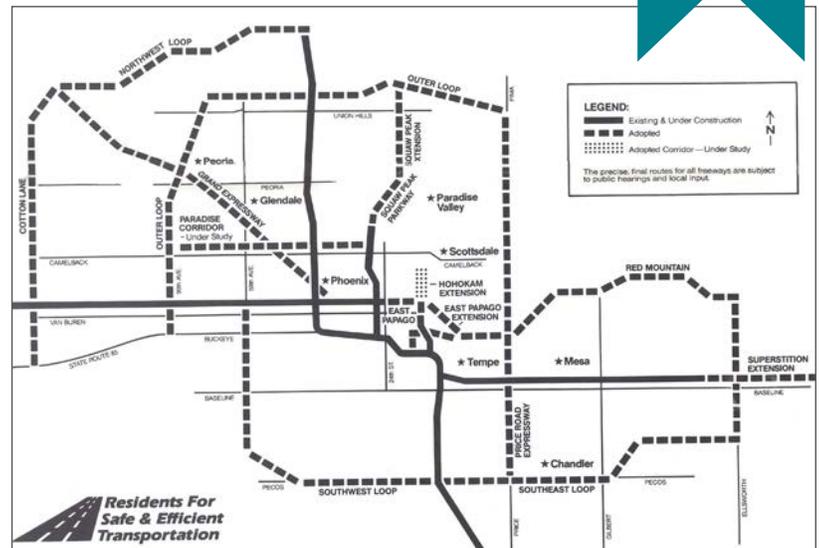
In a 1982 summary of MAG’s history, Driggs wrote: “The I-10 issue hit MAG like a ton of bricks.”

“The hard ‘no’ reaction to freeways really kind of stopped anything meaningful from happening for a long period of time,” recalls former Glendale Mayor George Renner, who served as MAG chair from 1982-84. “Of course, the growth had just exploded in the ‘70s, and moving into the ‘80s, it was apparent that we had to have a means to move people and goods around the Valley.”

It was time to regroup. A reevaluation study was initiated in 1975 that included a Regional Advisory Committee of 18 elected officials and



Former MAG Chair
George Renner



Freeway plan that became the basis for Prop 300.

citizen representatives, and a Technical Advisory Committee that consisted of transportation and planning staff from each MAG member agency and selected state agencies. In 1977, public hearings were held on a revised regional plan that included freeway, bus and rail transit alternatives. On January 4, 1978, the MAG Regional Council adopted the revised regional plan, which identified the Outer Loop (today known as Loop 101), the Squaw Peak Parkway (today’s Piestewa Freeway), the Paradise Freeway (later removed from the plan) and the East Papago (I-10).

The needle was moving.

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Political Pulse

But it would take cooperation from many, including the business community. Dennis Mitchem, a Phoenix businessman who served on several transportation advisory boards, chaired the campaign known as “Residents for Safe and Efficient Transportation.” Mitchem said the naysayers were wrong in thinking that the residents who voted against the referendum were opposed to freeways. What they were really opposed to was the freeway design, which took the freeway 100 feet in the air over neighborhoods.

“People thought they were voting against a freeway design of Interstate 10, and it was interpreted by the politicians and the press as being a vote against freeways,” recalls Mitchem. And the group had another revelation. While some opposed freeways because they objected to growth, others objected only because they wanted more transit built first. Getting transportation advocates on the same page was crucial.

“By the time we got to the county-wide tax vote, we concluded that we had to be broader than just freeways, we had to include transit in a meaningful way,” recalls Mitchem.

The next hurdle was funding.

Transportation Funding Challenges

“The cities at that time decided to go with a property tax to build the Outer Loop,” says DeBolske. “We had to get something moving. The only way to do that was to come up with an idea that was something we could control, because we couldn’t get anything out of the Legislature, because they wouldn’t pass enough gas tax money,” says DeBolske.

YES
on
300

Transportation Plan

- Doubles freeway network in ten years.
- New freeways under construction in one year!
- Trust Fund only for transportation improvements.
- Common-sense transit planning for the future.
- Better safety through less street congestion.
- Food and medicine are not taxed.
- Sales tax deductible from income taxes.

Let's do it now!

Special Election: October 8

But the property tax plan hit a roadblock from the business community.

“We didn’t like the proposal, both because of its funding source—the property tax in those days fell hugely disproportionately on the business community—and we didn’t like the idea of just building the Outer Loop and not building the entire system,” recalls newspaper columnist Bob Robb, who at the time worked for the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce. “So the Chamber approached MAG and asked MAG to engage in a process of examining options.”

The groups met in the basement of the League building.

“It was mostly a process of elimination,” says Robb. “The need was so large in terms of the capital expenditure required that no other funding source other than the sales tax could do the job at a politically acceptable level and within an acceptable period of time.”

Ken Driggs recalls the meeting, from which he came away convinced that a sales tax was the answer. “I think it was on Columbus Day in 1984. They said, ‘we want

you to take a look at this.’ And they put it on a computer and they started punching up some numbers, and I always said I’ve never seen so many zeroes after millions. And it was billions of dollars that a half-cent sales tax would bring in for transportation.”

But DeBolske had an even higher priority: keeping local control of the transportation dollars. He also remembers the meeting with Bob Robb.

“His advice was, let’s compromise. Let’s go for a sales tax. We can raise enough money with a sales tax. I looked at my hold card, and said I would recommend we go with a sales tax, too, if you go with us controlling it. Keep the Legislature out of it. And it should be used only for building the freeways, not maintaining them,” recalls DeBolske.

The half-cent sales tax for transportation went before voters on October 8, 1985.

Overwhelming Support

When the final ballots were tallied, Proposition 300 was an overwhelming success, with a whopping 72

Proposition 300 campaign materials. At the time of the election, the MAG region had the lowest number of freeway miles per capita of all major metro areas in the nation.



Former MAG Secretary Jack DeBolske

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percent voting in favor. Mayor Renner recalls a post-election celebration at the Westward Ho.

“We prevailed with a cooperative effort that involved private sector, public sector and an overwhelming amount of support from the public,” he says. “It pushed the Valley in a direction that was ‘no looking back’ as to how important a good transportation system is and how absolutely vital.”



Former Glendale Mayor George Renner

It also was a watershed moment for the Arizona Department of Transportation.

“Once the vote succeeded, we began a true partnership with the state and then-Director Charlie Miller,” recalls DeBolske. “For the first time, the agency had money with which to build a freeway system, and the system they built became state-of-the art.”

For Renner, who also presided over contentious negotiations to determine the Outer Loop alignment, it was a victory that still comes to mind when he drives Valley freeways.

“You just have one of those flash-backs that, gosh, this wasn’t here, none of this existed 30 years ago. So credit deserves to go to literally thousands of people that worked over the years to cause it to happen.”

Other Transportation Achievements

The decade saw other achievements in transportation. MAG assumed responsibility for the rideshare program in 1981, and Proposition 300 paved the way for the creation of the Regional Public Transportation Authority. The first phase of a Regional Transit Plan was adopted in 1982.

In another transportation arena, aviation, MAG created the first Regional Aviation System Plan (RASP) in 1979. These discussions would serve as an early test of MAG’s foundation of cooperation, when plans by the city of Phoenix to expand the Phoenix-Litchfield Airport were strongly opposed by the city of Goodyear. Despite threats from some to pull out of MAG during one contentious Regional Council meeting, in the end the Regional Council removed the expansion plans from the RASP and urged the two cities to work it out separately.

“You have to have certain masochistic tendencies to want to do this job of bringing people together,” acknowledges former MAG Secretary Jack DeBolske. “It’s very hard. You’ve got local elected officials that are concerned about their community, but you are asking them to be regional.” To put it in perspective, DeBolske coined the term “regionable,” referring to the need to be both regional and reasonable.

MAG had passed a test.

Air Quality

The Clean Air Act Amendments of 1977 required regions to develop air quality plans if they failed to meet national standards in order to receive any federal funds. MAG was designated as the lead air quality planning organization for this region on February 7, 1978. MAG began its important role of developing plans to reduce the three serious pollutants of carbon monoxide, ozone, and dust (then referred to as total suspended particulates).

“We were appalled that the federal government could be able to come in here and tell us in Arizona what we needed to do,” recalls Mayor Renner. “But, slowly but surely, people came to understand that the brown cloud was real and it was something that had to be dealt with. And whether you agreed or disagreed with the requirement, you had to have an air quality plan,” he says.

MAG’s first carbon monoxide plan was completed in 1982, and no violations of the one-hour standard were seen beyond 1984. The first plan to address ozone was completed in 1984. MAG continues to prepare plans for all three pollutants to this day.

In 1985, the Center for Law in the Public Interest filed a lawsuit over the fact that the EPA had not taken action on air quality plans in Arizona. By 1987, air quality issues had become paramount at MAG. Phoenix Mayor Terry Goddard, who served as chair from 1986-1988, was the key champion of MAG’s air quality efforts.

“I believe the air quality initiative is a model for things to come,” wrote Goddard in a message to MAG



Signs were placed during project construction to show how the Prop 300 funds were being used.

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members. “With air quality, we were forced by the courts to think regionally. But from now on, concern about the quality of our future will be the force that binds us together.”

Other Designations and Activities

Also during this decade, the first Executive Order calling for the development of an official set of population projections was issued by Governor Raul Castro in 1977. Other such executive orders followed, and continue to specify that an official set of population estimates be developed by MAG annually and official population projections approximately every three years. MAG conducted a Special Census in the region in 1985. In 1979, MAG was designated by the governor as the Solid Waste Planning Agency. In addition, MAG continued its criminal justice committee activities to develop a regional criminal justice plan and recommend projects for federal funding.

Human Services

In 1980, MAG found itself in a new planning role with the creation of the MAG Human Services Planning Office. In 1975, Congress had passed the first social services block grant to provide more proportionate funding across the United States. The Eastern states had sophisticated social services programs, but Western states were falling behind.

“Arizona had a very fledgling social service delivery system,” recalls Karen Novachek, the first director of the MAG Human Services Planning Office. “We had no community information and referral. We had no publicly funded child care. Services for domestic violence were not even considered. A few services were in place for children. Almost no services for elderly persons. No services for people with disabilities. So all of a sudden, Arizona had this windfall for funding and didn’t know how to spend it. It was a blank canvas in some respects.”

Novachek jokes that in the beginning, “MAG didn’t know what to do with us, we were social workers, and I think they were suspicious of us,” she says. “Jack DeBolske was always frustrated with us and he would say, ‘you’re generating too much paper!’”

But she adds that it was the relationship DeBolske had with then Department of Economic Security Director (DES) Bill Jamieson that allowed MAG to take responsibility for setting the priorities for a portion of Title XX funding.

“DES actually reached out to the Councils of

Governments and said ‘help.’ They could have kept the money all inside and made decisions about how that money should be spent. But they realized, I think in part because of Jack DeBolske, that they were not equipped internally or had no infrastructure externally to be able to adequately assess what the needs were. They felt that the COGs had their fingers on the pulse of their communities and they would be a good partner to fill in that blank canvas.”

Despite the complicated allocation process, Novachek said cities and service providers were soon working together to determine how to spend the money for the greatest impact. Even today, Novachek says she is excited about what was accomplished during that time.

“I think the big accomplishment of that era was that MAG played a pivotal role in helping form a robust delivery system,” she says. “We were able to begin to address community needs that had gone unserved.”

9-1-1

Another MAG program that forever changed the lives of Maricopa County residents was the implementation of a regional 9-1-1 system. MAG was instrumental in bringing the system to the Valley. MAG formed its first 9-1-1 Technical Advisory Committee in 1978, but it wasn’t until 1981 that money became available—thanks in large part to Diane McCarthy, a lead champion of the system who served on the Arizona Corporation Commission.

“The Commission approved the use of \$4.8 million in leftover funds from a Mountain Bell refund case to buy equipment,” says McCarthy. “In 1983, Governor Bruce Babbitt signed the bill forming the 9-1-1 revolving fund, and we were on our way.”

Former 9-1-1 Committee Chair Tom Sawyer says no one believed that MAG could weave a successful system through 24 cities and towns, three Native American communities and Maricopa County.

“But, relying on technical expertise from MAG member agencies, the committee developed electronic switching capabilities where calls could be received within each city,” he recalls.

The official rollover to the 9-1-1 system took place on September 9, 1985. 



Dispatcher Carol Mero in Mesa’s first 9-1-1 center, which became part of the regional system in 1985.

The story will continue in the next quarterly edition of MAGAZINE, focusing on 1987-1997.