



The Rail~Volution Podcast, Episode 56
Inside the Phoenix TOD Community Plan
With Elias Valencia and Victor Vidales
Host: Jeff Wood

On this episode, Elias Valencia, a planner with the City of Phoenix, and Victor Vidales, a local resident and business owner, talk about the creation of the South Central TOD Community Plan, which was passed by the City of Phoenix city council in March of 2022.

This transcript is partially edited. To confirm content, please [listen to the podcast](#).

Intro (0s): Welcome to the Rail~Volution podcast. This is Tamar Shapiro, CEO of Rail~Volution. We're a national network focused on transit, related mobility options and community development. We host an annual conference as well as additional year round capacity building and learning opportunities. The podcast is a chance to hear from a range of stakeholders, as we dig deep into what it takes to make communities better for people

Host (38s): Hey, there I'm Jeff Wood, principal of The Overhead Wire and your host. This month on the Rail~Volution podcast, we're listening in on a one-to-one conversation between City of Phoenix Planner, Elias Valencia, and community champion, Victor Vidales. Elias and Victor talk about the process of creating the south central Tod community plan and what it takes to create strategies that empower neighborhoods and reduce displacement. Stay with us.

Elias Valencia: All right, Victor. So thanks for meeting up today. I know it's been quite a busy day, not just day, but quite a busy few years, right? We're here getting able to sit down and talk about the South Central TOD community plan. I like to take any opportunity we can to chat about that, especially with our stakeholders and with you. But just for everybody here, my name is Elias Valencia. I'm a transit-oriented development planner with the city of Phoenix's long range planning team.

And we're here today with Victor Vidales to talk about south central Tod corridor. You're in the community plan, which was approved by the city council in March of this year, 2022. Victor, do you care do a little introduction.

Victor Vidales: Yes, thank you for having me. And my name is Victor Vidales. I'm a long-time resident and local property owner here in the south central Phoenix corridor. I actually was born and raised in this neighborhood. My parish is St. Catherine of Sienna, which is right on Central Avenue. So I've known the streets ever since I was a very young boy. I've seen a transition from a very agricultural area into a more urban area, and now been focused on a

vision of even coming more urban than before. But my wife and I, we reside here in the neighborhood. We started a business here on south central, almost 18 years ago.

We've raised our five children here in the neighborhood, and this is our place. This is our home. This is our barrio, and this is where we live. And, and we'll continue to call home for generations to come.

Elias Valencia: Well, Victor, you basically hit it right there where you said, live, play and pray, right. And the south central corridor. Right? Right. And those are all the makings of what may call a well-rounded. You have all of those support mechanisms there and that community that keeps you wanting to live there and thrive in here.

And especially the multi-generation that you're raising up here as a south central Phoenix resident and with your brood coming up there. So before we get to south central and the TOD plan, I mean, did you ever see yourself being involved with this project?

Victor Vidales: I did see myself being involved in this project because I've been very active in the community for decades. When I came back from the U S army, I was gone for about five years. I had to leave south central for a lot of issues that occurred in our neighborhood, including some gangs, some violence, and some issues with the family, including the loss of my mom and my sister. So, you know, coming back to south central, after five years of being away, I really made an effort to get involved in the neighborhood because I felt like nothing had changed. And you know, when you're young and a quarter of your life has passed and you don't see any progress and improvement of the neighborhood or some of the situations, it really called for me to get involved.

And so, you know, being involved in this TOD process really started with that neighborhood involvement. But I think really got sharpened when we started organizing around the light rail, Light rail was going to come to our community and we knew that we would either be in the way and it would just run over us, or we could actually be a part of the process and influence what that light rail would look like. And I think we've made a pretty significant imprint on what the south central light rail extension looks like.

So it made it a natural fit for us to jump in from the design and planning elements of, of the light rail from all the way back to the environmental assessment, leading all the way to the 30, 60, 90% design, and then understanding that, what's next and how can we influence that so that the community had a voice and what their neighborhood actually looks like, without the displacement and gentrification that we've seen happen all across the country where light rail has actually come into neighborhoods like ours.

Elias Valencia: Not to take away too much from where you're heading there with the light rail. I know we're going to have plenty to talk about regarding that in our triumphs and trials, with that, you said some really good stuff there about leaving home for about five years and coming back and noticing in essence, it sounded like, you know, you, you made improvements on

yourself and you got back and then you notice that you wasn't improving. And that was part of that initial spark there. So almost like the drive to, to be that positive change,

Victor Vidales: You know, you grow up in a neighborhood that really was just torn apart by gang violence and other issues related to poverty, but it does change your perspectives on things and, and, and on life.

And so going into the small town of Morenci, where my family was been for four generations and then going to the U S army and traveling all over the country and meeting other people that primarily were from low income communities really did for me in a, in a different way then. So when I came back home, I was, I was completely different and I felt fortunate, but also felt obligated because I had this benefit, that I should carve a pathway for other youth and other people in our community.

And, and so I did that early on, organizing community cleanups, doing mentoring with kids that were also in families that were tied to gangs or, or, you know, their parents were in prison, or if there was substance abuse in the house, you know, a lot of things that were really just plaguing our neighborhoods back when I was a kid was still there when I came back. So it was really helpful for me to be able to help other youth in the neighborhood who actually wanted to break that same cycle of poverty and those same cycles of issues that were occurring in their home and in their neighborhood.

Yeah, it was, it was really purposeful work for me to come in and, and be tied to my neighborhood in that way.

Elias Valencia: Well, you've definitely been a mentor for your community, and I can even tell you, working with you as a planner here, I've also been mentored by some of the talks that we've had and from your viewpoints and your experiences, I can't forget the day that, you know, you put me to work there at the carwash. It's like, you know, I have worked quite hard in my life too Victor. I share a similar background in that. I come from a low-income family by binaural. My family immigrated into America, and I was born here in the U S and so I've had a lot of privileges that I, that I take for granted in one aspect given their background. But then growing up, I would look at some of the areas that we were in. It's like, why does our area look different than these other areas? Why don't we have sidewalks? Why are there no lights? Why are there animals hit on the street every day? And we could be one of those animals one of these days, if these cars keep getting close.

Come to find out, you know, that's what happens when you live in a disinvested area. I didn't know about city planning at that time, but that was kind of what was shaping me to get involved as a senior planner.

Victor Vidales: So w what did get you into becoming a city planner? And was there some moment from your childhood that you saw, you know, whether it was at school or something that you wanted to get involved in forming your city or what she thought a city could be?

Elias Valencia: So, when it clicked was it didn't click in school because I was originally going for philosophy. And then I got even more lost than, than I felt at that point. But it was those things that I would see my mother working, and we were living in a house, you know, it was probably six of us in the house.

And I was just seeing her struggles and wondering, why do we feel, why does this feel like a third world country where we're living at? And I wanted to do something to help. And so I knew finishing school was one thing I had to do because, you know, my mother believed in me there and I know she believed in me more than I did myself. And eventually, you know, I started believing in myself as well, but I've been seeing and learning about land use and that things shape and happened because of these actions that are above just the neighborhood level.

You know, these are like at the city level, at the federal level, that's what got me into city planning. I wanted to say, well, not only can I help change my mother's neighborhood and I could try to make a better impact in the world. And it started that way. It started that way. Then you get into the bureaucracy and it's, you're just approving plans and stamping on fences. And then thankfully this opportunity came up in Phoenix to be part of the south central TOD community plan and said, this is what I remember learning about in school and the types of changes that could happen. And I wanted to be a part of that. So that's how I got involved here.

Victor Vidales: Well, yeah, that, that, I think that, you know, seeing your, the way you handled shepherding this plan through the many obstacles. You know, you could tell there was something more there driving you. So it was something unique to see, and in a city planner to really connect with the community the way you did. And, and so we appreciate that, you know, in south central corridor that you made such strong efforts to connect to the people and really put people first.

And I think that's really what resonated with our community is that, you know, when you have interactions with the city over decades, sometimes we've seen it well, we're all very reluctant to participate in the public process. And I can say you really made it easy to connect with you and to trust you and trust what you were doing through this process of creating a plan that I think is something that I've never seen before.

You know, being involved with so many different planning efforts, you know, going back decades. I really feel like this plan, you know, what we see is that it has more fingerprints of people from the community than I've ever seen in any planning process. And I think that's important, and I don't want to jump too far ahead. I know we're going to get into this, but, you know, I just wanted to share that with you, Elias, some on your, you know, desire to change things and, and you know, how it really connected with us to also have a desire that same change for our neighborhood.

Elias Valencia: This experience was a very humbling one for me at certain points and having strong community champions, such as yourself and many others, our steering committee and

our SoPhoo convening and the south central collaborative. We'll talk about all of them folks in a little bit as well, but thanks for that acknowledgement, Victor, and also want to give you kudos because taking it to the forefront there and being a champion it on a volunteer basis to, you know, you're not compensated for that work. You know, it takes a lot of heart and a lot of love for the community to be able to do that. And that's what makes these and drives these types of plans and why I continue to say that it's been a privilege to be able to work with you on this.

Now we have been trying to, you know, talk about the benefits of the light rail and the TOD transit oriented development and walkable urban code for south Phoenix. But south Phoenix is a world-class corridor on its own, right? Victor you've been mention in that and stating that, and several of your conversations with community stakeholders and elected officials, and you tell us a little bit more about what makes the south central corridor that world-class corridor.

Victor Vidales: Well, I think it's really came from visiting other parts of the country and other parts of the world. And so when I refer to south Phoenix becoming a world-class community or south central becoming that, that world-class destination, it really stems from visiting places all across the country, like New York, Chicago, San Francisco, Seattle, you know, getting to travel outside of the country in Mexico, in London, I'm in Birmingham, in the United Kingdom, in Vancouver and Ottawa and Ontario, Toronto, all the cities in Canada, you know, you, you start to see these major metropolitans really just function differently than we have here in the city of Phoenix.

And when you become the fifth largest city in the country, and you still see that the way the city is operating is not in line with those other world-class cities. I think it's important to put that desire into the public realm, into the public square to say, why not us? Just like you talked about with your mom's neighborhood, some of those other desires, you know, why can't we be like London? Why can't we be like, you know, these other great cities We can, and we just have to be purposeful about it.

You know, we have to make these long-term commitments. And I haven't been paid to do this work in the community, but I have been paid in different ways, knowing that I've advanced some of the initiatives that is going to set the foundation to really hold up this community that has been overlooked for decades. You know, when you come from a low income community, there's actually a lot of beauty that comes from being resilient and living in poverty and the community that it can create.

I really believe we have a very special thing in south Phoenix and that culture that perseverance of going through all the ills of poverty and, and all the challenges of a place that wasn't necessarily well planned or designed for a large human habitation, really makes us special people. And, and so I think we have a foundation of people that really can make this place, something unlike anybody else has ever experienced in the world.

You know, people come to Arizona for renewal, they come to Arizona for this, you know, the Phoenix, right? The whole story of the Phoenix, you know, coming from the ashes. And, and,

and I feel like south central exemplifies that, you know, or we've been burnt to the ground and we're rising up and we want the whole world to see, you know, the beauty of our people, the beauty of our mountain, the beauty of our river, the beauty of our city. And we want to show the world that. And so that, that's what I mean by world-class destination, where just like you would want to visit any of those other great cities, South Phoenix becomes one of those destinations that you want to experience in your life.

Elias Valencia: And Victor, you know, you touched on all of those geographic resources that are here and the corridor for south central. You know, there are some states that can't offer you the variety that you see in this.

Just for everybody listening, the south central TOD corridor is about a 5.1 mile stretch and stretches south of the railroad tracks, the union Pacific tracks there, and just south of downtown. And it goes down to south mountain avenue between the sevens. So that seventh avenue and seventh street. So you got about a 5.1 square mile area. And in that stretch, Vic, there, you, you got, you got the mountains, the river downtown, and you got, you know, places is one thing, but what makes place is people. And you brought that up. The culture, the resiliency behind the families that have been living in the corridor through all these times in planning history.

You know, we got the, from inception of statehood from the, the old farms that were here then to the red lining practices where all of those uses were pushed down to the south, right? Landfills, the processing plants, all of that stuff. And it just continued to build over time. And the heavy concentration of industrial uses. Yet, like you brought out, this is a world-class destination because of its location to all of the amenities.

But you know, it's not about connecting necessarily south Phoenix to the world, right. It's to connect the world to south Phoenix because anytime I've come down here to visit, I feel like I'm at home. It feels like family. It feels like that place I've been missing out on. You don't get that in suburbia. Definitely not. And so I agree with you there on that world-class vision for, for the corridor.

And, and not to sound too nerdy though. I know we got, got to get some demographics specs here, but this is also very important because it's kind of what helped shape and guide our mission and the plan as a community and what we wanted to reach there. South central, the south central corridor is basically a community of 50, 50, 50% are renters and the other 50% are owners, but of those 50% that rent, two thirds are at the below the 60% average median income threshold. which basically what does, what does that mean to you?

Victor Vidales: Well, it shows the vulnerability that this community has when light rail is been positioned or framed as an economic development tool.

We heard all the statistics, you know, when voting for the light rail, wanting to bring it to south central was that, you know, for every dollar spent in light rail, that there's an \$8 return on

investment. That's what we've seen here in the city of Phoenix. So when you think about that, that's nearly a \$10 billion investment, that's going to come into this corridor. And so there, there's definitely some concern there because when two thirds of the people in between the sevens in south central live on less than \$20,000 a year, and their ownership is very limited, they have the greatest risk of the most vulnerable to be removed.

And we already are in the process of, of, we're challenged right now with actually helping families to have that quality of life that they desire for them and for their families, because their income is so low. Things are so expensive in Phoenix right now. And in south Phoenix that you could actually say it's already been gentrified because of the cost to live here is just gotten so far out of hand that people have to live on the fringes. If they want to move, if their lease is not renewed or their trailer is taken away for not making a payment on it, it really does not give them the ability to stay here very long. So, yeah, that, that, that's our big concern. And that's part of why the south central convening in south central collaborative came together to say, what are sort of things that we can work on. Some strategies to minimize displacement and gentrification, because that's something that is real and people in this community are going to be impacted if we don't do something to work with city and the public and private environments to stakeholders to try to help these families.

Elias Valencia: So speaking of those challenges, Victor, you know, resiliency was one of those, one of the presentations we gave about resiliency post pandemic, where we start talking about the, the bounce back and the adaptability, how all those factors come into play. But yet the biggest factor is going to be love, the love that the community has for one another. And that's part of the reason that, that vision, that statement came across to reject displacement and to share prosperity with the existing residents, tenants, and those future residents that may choose to live in the corridor as well. Right?

You brought up tons of challenges that right now the current market condition is not helping at all whatsoever, but those rental rates and housing ownership, housing attainability. And then when we were going through this process, the pandemic hit as well at that point, I, you know, we were pretty much at a point where we could continue to work on the plan internally and get those interdisciplinary departments to look at it.

Thankfully, we had the opportunity to do all of that wonderful outreach before the pandemic hit full force. But even before that, you know, those were the, the, these demographics here show that living on the fringe is not, not safe, is not comfortable, knowing that the neighborhood you call home could no longer be yours due to somebody selling and redeveloping a site, or just due to jobs. And, and many challenges are there right now, too. Have you seen any assistance with federal programs that are coming in there to help those that, that are in the corridor, anything like that?

Victor Vidales: You know, not enough. So, you know, of course we all saw what the federal government did for COVID and offering stimulus checks and in credits and other support for small business, with the PPP programs. And there was a lot there that came out to support

those that were vulnerable because of the pandemic, but not enough. And what you said is exactly right. You know, we have literally thousands of residents that can be displaced by one owner.

So even though they may own their trailer, those neighborhoods that have been a long time landing place for so many, especially our, our immigrant population or our first-generation Americans are at risk. And so there are real challenges that we have, or, you know, I don't say we have all the solutions yet, but it really helps to have a, I think forums like this, where other cities, you know, are dealing with this across the country.

And I really believe that south Phoenix, south central has an opportunity to really model what this country's all about, you know, determination and, and you know, how people can choose to do great things, starting at home and starting in their neighborhood and starting into the broader community. And I really believe with what this south central plan has done is it's captured those aspirations, those dreams, those visions that people have for their own community.

And now we have to align the policies and the capital and all the other tools and resources that we need to really help this community live out what they've dragged, you know, they vision for their life. And it doesn't help that, you know, a lot of this community was set back generationally with some of the redlining practices. Now we've learned that communities and areas have been red lined, they've been impacted, you know, they never got to participate in the equity growth for that, that, that growth of, of, of wealth in their neighborhood or in their, in their families, because there was no investment coming into their neighborhoods.

There was no investment coming into their community. There was no ability to create ownership for themselves. So these are challenges that I know don't just exist in south central it all over the country. So if we can really come together with love with patients, with the ability to empower those who live here to start that progress of breaking those cycles of poverty, you know, there's a human development side to this corridor that has to happen along with the physical and the built environment.

And the, and those are challenges that I don't know all the answers to, but I think there's enough people in the city and in this country that could figure some solutions. And that's what we're hoping we can do and accomplish here. So, Victor, what do you think then about, I know you had original thoughts and what are your thoughts with the light rail and transit oriented development for the south central corridor? Or do you think that it's appropriate and what can that help signify for these members of the community and for yourself as a property owner?

Yeah, I mean, I, I do believe there's a benefit here, although it's painful to transition from a car dependent or car oriented community to a transit oriented one. And we've seen that by businesses in our corridor has, who have closed their doors because they were dependent on the vehicle. And now that the traffic patterns have been disrupted because of construction of this five mile extension, all at one time, there has been some real challenges there, but if we

can make it to the other side and we can help those small businesses and residents to stay in place and participate in the actual operation of the spite row, I believe there's many benefits that the city and that this part of our city is going to be able to benefit from, you know, the access to education, a higher education, a better quality education access to healthcare and healthcare facilities.

We don't have a hospital in south central. You know, we have to travel outside the corridor, access to jobs and higher paying jobs. The need to have a vehicle might disappear over time, knowing that they're going to have a reliable source of transportation that they can depend on to get to work, to get to school, to get to their healthcare. So there are definitely a lot of benefits that the light rail is going to bring to us.

And then it gives the ability for the city to really look at how they develop around the corridor around the light rail. So the densities and, and all the opportunities for creating affordable housing to create affordable retail space, to create affordable office space for your entrepreneurs. And for those that are in the community, it can really be something special if planned, right. And if done, right. And I think the people in this community have shown that they want it.

We had to vote for it three different times. And the last boat, you know, well, over 70% of the community said, we want this in our neighborhood. We want this in the community because we understand that even though it's going to be hurtful, initially, there's going to be these long-term benefits. And we see that again, going into the world-class city, you go to places like Washington DC, or New York or London, and you see their transportation systems and the mixed incomes that exist around those systems are just, they're amazing.

And they really create these vibrant places to live, work, play, and pray. As you said, it's tough to see that vibrancy right now through the construction traffic, you bring up a good point there, Victor. And I'm thinking back now in part of that construction work also included replacing that old infrastructure that was in place right near you and almost a hundred years. So in one sense, I'm a little torn because yeah, I've seen, I've walked down those streets and it is, it is tough to traverse.

And especially with the temporary fixes during construction, you know, how do you walk on, on the asphalt there? And especially for those that are mobile impaired, and then you look and you weigh the benefits also, what would happen if it got torn up again? You know, you put the infrastructure in, then you tear it up again, months later for the rail line, it's almost like the lesser of the two evils, but if you said this, those growing pains, and I really do hope that as we continue to cooperate and coordinate there, collaborate with the contractor.

And that leads me to ask you a couple of other questions. You've been involved with a lot of groups that are maintaining and collaborating on what the plan has called out for and what the members of the community have time for not only as part of the newest, one of the newest groups for the south central corridor, the so-called convenient neighborhood group that you

helped. Co-found there, if I'm not mistaken. And then the south central collaborative, and you're also on the south central construction advisory board as well.

You mind expanding on any one of those three? Yeah. I mean, they're all really connected because, you know, again, going through the initial design of the light rail and, and being impacted, we decided to collaborate and work with our neighbors to the north central city style to the warehouse district to say that, Hey, if we come together, we'll have a stronger voice in advocating for what we really believe the slight row should be and how it should serve us. It should be a connector and not a divider. And part of that, some of the initial wins that we received was, you know, going through the planning process with the design team of AECOM and valley Metro and the city of Phoenix.

And before some of those groups were selected, the primes like Kiawah and AECOM, we were able to work with the city of Phoenix and valley Metro in saying that there's this financial benefit that comes from investing in the light rail and these multinational companies come in and this is what they do. And they're very good at it. And we said, well, how could we benefit from that? And how could we create language in these RFPs to create a, a local benefit of a local preference in supporting workforce development.

And some of some things that we did was create a workforce development program and both the design and the construction contract. And I remember when we got that language to be approved by the city of Phoenix and valley Metro, it was such a big win for the community. And then there was the artist's piece that they decided to separate out that. And, you know, we were not going to allow that to just go to the national level, but we said, you know what? We want the same language that we put in the RFP for the design and the construction construction contracts and RFPs to also be in the artist's selection process.

And so we created the language, it got adopted by Valley Metro and the City of Phoenix. And we were able to select 10 of the 15 artists to be local artists. And that was \$3 million of contracts that were able to stay local. And not only was it, you know, wealth building, it also created a new skillsets for artists that didn't necessarily have the experience to do public art. And so now these artists are going to be, have opportunities all across the country and all across the globe to, they now understand the process of public art and what it means to do that type of work.

So, yeah, the, those neighborhood groups and those community groups coming together, really having these conversations start to find pathways, to carve out opportunities for light rail benefit people now during the process and the same thing with the construction getting workforce development, so that we had a workforce that is not only not just transient anymore, where you're just pulling people from light rail projects from city to city, to city, but actually empowering and educating people to have that skillset here locally.

So they can continue to build light rail throughout the city of Phoenix. So yeah, those, those were some of the victories that the south central collaborative was able to initiate and implement and benefiting the community.

Elias Valencia: Yeah, Victor, I mean, I think you and the collaborative members, you guys worked behind the scenes feverish lead to help also draft these guidelines, design guidelines, to consider for local developers, working on mentoring and empowering local developers as well, which I believe is one of the best ways.

In my opinion, as a city planner, you want to retain culture. If you want to minimize the ill effects of gentrification and reduce displacement, then what better way than to have local investment with local community interests in mind.

Tell us a little bit there about the gentrification work group and, and the local developer designs, and some of the things that and projects that you guys are working with on that.

Victor Vidales: So we had this opportunity, you know, to right out the gate before the plan was actually approved, having a mission-based developer, a local non-profit developing a very prominent corner in the corridor.

And because we were educated through all the statistics, all the research. So the TLD grant that came to our neighborhood and hearing what, you know, all the different voices from the neighborhood, what they desire for the community, a lot of them wanted to stay in place. And this nonprofit came in and wanted to build a workforce housing to target the 60 to 80% of median income. And right away, our neighborhood groups came together and said, Hey, here's our design guidelines, but we also want you to consider that the majority of people in this community live at 30 to 50% of AMI.

And so, what can we do to work with you to achieve that? So that people that live in this neighborhood will have an opportunity to participate and live in this new, beautiful community that you're going to develop. So they, they were very transparent with us and told us all their challenges from reaching that 30 to 50% of AMI. One was the, that they, again, a national CDFI who will remain anonymous at this point, gave them a very generous loan to acquire the land. But the interest rates were so high that it was almost a hard money loan. So that was one thing, you know, driving up costs and, and not only driving a cost, but it's shrunk, their timelines pushed through the planning process so that they didn't have the ability to work with us because they needed to retire, they needed to get to a certain timeline and accomplish certain things in their, their entitlements in order to retire that debt so they can move on and get their construction line and really develop it.

And then another thing that they shared with us, and you talked about it earlier was the lack of infrastructure in our community. So the offsite improvements that there were, the city was going to require them to do was about a million and a half dollars of offsite improvements. And so all these different things were hitting this developer that was, you know, a nonprofit, a

mission-based developer, and they're not able to reach those that are most vulnerable in our community to actually live in the neighborhood that they're developing.

So we did oppose that development. And I would like to say that, you know, we were somewhat victorious because initially they only committed to nine units of 30 to 50% of AMI. And we just recently got a presentation or they added 32 units of 30 to 50% of AMI. And that doesn't seem like much of a victory, but for us, it was because that's 30% of those units are now going to be made for people that actually live and work in this community. And they can participate in the development of their neighborhood and improve their quality of life.

But those are the type of challenges that in as a neighborhood, we started to say, you know what, we can't continue to spend all this energy fighting developers. We have to build some skill sets ourselves and look at how do we become neighborhood developers and develop some of those housing typologies that might be the solution for this neighborhood and say, you know what, it can be done, maybe not at your scale, but at the neighborhood scale.

And at a neighborhood development scale, we might be able to create solutions for our neighborhood, for our neighbors, people that sit in the pews with us, people that shop with us, people that work with us in our neighborhoods, we can actually provide those solutions for meal. And so we're working on those plans as a, as a group with the collaborative, the south central collaborative and sopho convening on developing the future developers of our communities that want to take these initiatives on and build that skill set for themselves and build wealth for people in our community, as well as themselves

Elias Valencia: If only there was a community plan somewhere that help guide and, and leave the way. So then circling back to the south central 2d community plan, the south central corridor is not the first transit oriented development corridor in the city of Phoenix. However, I agree with you totally, that this is the first quarter, and that is being done in a different way than, especially from the existing ones. Not to bad mouth or anything on those processes because they were all wonderful. They all led to a great use of high capacity transit growing and expanding the city.

Had they not been successful, we probably wouldn't have the South central corridor as unfortunate as that sounds thankfully, we had federal funding to help with the planning efforts and those planning efforts, again, with 2008 sounds not too long ago, right. Anything after 2000, to me sounds like it was just five years ago, but that's, you know, I guess when you grow up in high school, around that area, dating myself here, but I always feels like yesterday, but that's 2008 to 22. I can't do that that quick 14 years, 14 years, almost 15 years. That's when the light rail came to Phoenix. I think about that in the scope of the city's history. That's like yesterday, right? Everything before that was all cars, cars, cars. So we got that 2008 light rail actually came in with before there was even a community plan for it really, there was a Tod strategic policy framework to try to help shape and guide, knowing and realizing that light rail development may be to be different because it's a different type of transit model.

And Hey, you know, you mentioned something earlier today in our discussion that we had prior to this about a density cap and how to make it so that it can be sustainable instead of subsidized. So that TOD policy framework was there. Then re-invent Phoenix came in 2011 for the five transit oriented development areas that are existing. And then we fast forward to 2016 when the federal funding and grant started going through. And the planning efforts, I didn't come on board until mid 2018.

So you gave a good summary there about your involvement with the efforts where even before we had even received the planning grant, to even do a community plan. And that was critical because you were able to do some of those design components, local artists, local labor force, and skill enhancement power in giving them the opportunities to branch out, career-wise also all from within the corridor. If that doesn't show that there's acceptance of community, as long as they are part of that process, I don't know what does, I think that was the key component that they needed to be a part of this process.

And so going back to the community plan of being part of this process, how do you think that outreach efforts where I don't go on with promise Arizona was involved. I have some stats here, but we can get into, but what were your initial takeaways and thoughts? I think you were in some of the road shows as well.

Victor Vidales: Yeah. I thought that, you know, one that, that was a process in itself because you had a, not your normal planning group become a prime on a TOD grant to really drive this process and Promise Arizona and Gould Evans coming together to become the co-products on this, I thought was one of the most critical steps that the city allowed to happen beginning this process, because what they did is they went door to door. They actually went to the people and they knocked on over 7,000 doors and had all these individual conversations and assessments. They had all these road shows and all these meetings in the community that again, really started to inform the plan. That was special because in all the years that I've been involved in the planning process since early 2000, when we first did rio salado beyond the banks.

And back then there was in that plan part of transit 2000, the light rail coming to south central. But back then, you know, I think the incentives federally were a little perverse because it was more about getting cars off the street, as opposed to reaching communities that were already dependent on mass transportation. And so we lost that first opportunity to be part of that initial light rail construction, because more people in, particularly in the sevens or south central were already using mass transportation, the bus, you know, cause we didn't, we don't have light rail, but yeah.

Going and seeing that process, it's something that I never saw before because it wasn't just a dozen or two dozen community leaders that were met over months to inform a planning process with the city and their, you know, their, their consultants and those who received the prime. But it was really a, a strong effort of community engagement that I think is unlike anything I've never seen it. So it's really special in that way.

Elias Valencia: One thing that I noticed myself here was the amount of community involvement was intense. It was, I've seen planning efforts before we ended up being doing planning for about 15 years now, 600 right here in Phoenix. And in my time here in Phoenix, I had not seen an effort like this in, in my time here, hearing you say you haven't seen anything of that amount and you've been here, obviously your whole life is amazing that I was able to be a part of that process. And I did see that I get to see the community engaged. It was in English and Spanish. They had standalone Spanish workshops too, not just, you know, combined with the translator. They did them different times of the week. So not just on the weeknight, but also on a weekend. And they included, of course everybody's favorite, food and activities. Cause you're not, you won't participation. You gotta make it fun. Right? So it was fun talking to the families there and getting them to participate in those activities just came natural there, that the boards were out. They were, our consultant did a great job. I think with the activities they're making them very colorful, engaging that they have a word cloud where everybody's contribution was designed and do this artistic element showing basically it's like per sample and the type of things that are going out with people's concerns and thoughts. That amount of attention to detail. It was very imperative in the plan coming together while you guys were there doing a behind the scenes work with your workshop in groups and the consultant. I had to do the, the, be the liaison with the South Central Tod steering committee. Right.

Let me tell you a little bit about that bit there. You, originally were recommended to be one of those members and I think you had been other interests. And then you got involved with these other groups and I'll tell you, you know, that group, it was an amazing group to work with, but it was also a different type of realm, right? I'm stuck there in the government sector. I don't get to be having all the fun with the public. They're engaging in activities on those conversations. These were the difficult conversations. These were like, where has the city banned all these these years? Things with racism and environmental justice.

And when I talk about humbling, when I first got into this, I thought environmental justice was green systems and global warming, no environmental justice has to do with those tough discussions, right? Our committee at one point spent months having a repeat discussion on displacement, displacement and gentrification and criminalization and food access, all real social issues that have built part of the background and history here in the corridor, right.

That lack of trust. Right. And when I started hearing that, hearing that I would say, I know why this is here because I grew up in a neighborhood just like that, which is why I felt that way I did when I was at my mother's. Which is why I take such personal pride in this project. You know, there's trust here. And me working with the community. There's a level of trust there as well. And I can't let my friends and family down in south central corridor, which is why I am committed to this here.

But those discussions from the committee members then also led to that vision that was captured here about rejecting displacement and sharing that prosperity and supporting walkable, urban code and the transit oriented development. What are your thoughts about that vision? Is that really reflective of what the community has chimed to new?

Victor Valencia: Yeah. I, a hundred percent believe that, you know, the reason I chose not to be part of the TOD steering committee is, you know, I actually spoke to your boss and telling him, you know, there's some real time things that need to be happening.

We can't just wait and not have these conversations because, you know, there was a lot of restrictions with that committee from being involved and engaged because it violated the public meaning laws and other things that I just didn't want to be constrained with, and I felt like I could still be a part of, I only missed, I believe two meetings of the TOD meeting, but I was always there as a public participant and could speak freely and not only in the meetings, but outside of the meetings.

And I thought that was critical because there was other things that we were able to work in parallel as the TOD planning was going about its way and working its way towards being approved. There were things that we were working on ourselves, like the design guidelines, talking to community members, talking to business owners, talking to residents and saying, Hey, this is what we want for our community. And we were introducing these things into the TOD planning committee and it was embraced, you know, we had these opportunities to present and to share our visions and ideas, and they were vetted out and a lot of those things were made it to be brought into the plan.

And I think the, the most important part of this plan from our perspective in the neighborhood, from the collaborative and the sopho convening is, it wasn't just about getting it approved. It wasn't just about capturing all the voices in the document. It was about how this leads to implementation. Without this plan being implementable, it was really going to be a waste of time and energy. So I now believe we have something of substance that we can implement.

And you know, when you are engaged in community planning and organizing for so many years, there's this intellectual knowledge that you get to carry on because of all your experiences of working with different plans in the corridor. And to have this plan now that is so comprehensive in its approach that it really gives us a tool to live out what it says, you know, a corridor wide vision, which is special.

You know, you're not, I know that we're pretty special when you talk to other neighborhoods that are along the light rail and say, Hey, we want this. We want this process to happen is as tedious and as difficult as it was, it really is something of beauty. And, and now it's our job to implement it.

Elias Valencia: Yeah, no, your background, you said he had a military background, they got battlefield, right? This is basically a battlefield you've been praying for him, prep for and sharing that, that wealth of knowledge with the youth, local developers as well.

And those that happen to be in the position where they do own property. This plan as a guiding document is wonderful, you know, and you said it wasn't about getting an approved and

thankfully it didn't get approved. Right? In fact, the steering committee did unanimously approve it. There was one and the planning commission did as well. And then at the city council, there was a couple of fold-out, but that's still passed. One thing here is that I do want to bring a light to us. There was a discussion there because the plan used to be called the south central equitable transit oriented development community plan.

And there was a discussion on that word equity and whether, even though the plan does too, an excellent job of capturing what equity is and what it could be, that there's real work that needs to be done to become equitable. So in a unanimous move, the committee did say, let's remove equity from it because that's one of the things that we're going to be working for. And you said it, Victor implementation implementation is key. What all of this would have been for, not if, if we don't implement it.

And that leads me to this tough question here as a non regulatory document, what keeps you believing in this document? I have an answered for it, but what keeps you believing in the ability of this doctor?

Victor Vidales: You know, it's the, it's the hope that when you have self-determination and I know what it's like to break the cycle of poverty and to create opportunities for yourself, this is what makes America such a great place to live. You know, in one generation I've through education, through understanding, through wisdom and experience.

I broken the cycles of poverty. My wife and my five children are now able to live a much better life than I was given an opportunity as a youth. And so us owning this plan and us sharing with our policy makers, this is what the plan says, you know, holding them accountable to all the things that are going to impact this neighborhood, to the individual projects that will come, you know, it's up to us to own this and really live it out.

And, and, and I think that's really the opportunity for, for us is that we have something that has captured a pretty broad base of perspectives. And, and it's been brought together in a way that we can actually make this happen. It feels like it's something that's achievable because we were all part of that process. And, and I think that there's, you know, you talk about equity. I remember when the equitable transportation oriented development fellowship came to town, I got to give them a tour of between the sevens.

And when I gave them that tour, they had all these different interviews with community members and they came up with this really beautiful policy document. It was with policy. I can't remember the other institutions that were, I think urban land Institute was also part of it, even though they really said, you know, it can't just be a light rail project. It has to be a neighborhood improvement plan. And, you know, when just, there's certain things that you've learned throughout the process that really start to empower you like concurrent non project activities.

You know, when you go through that whole light rail planning and as a community member, you're like, okay, well, why isn't the city where all my sinless, you know, or are all the contract

non project activities to support the light rail, to bring connectivity from all these neighborhoods that never received the infrastructure investment when they were annex into the city 60 years ago, you know? And so you see the inequities that, that exist, but again, learning the language, the finding of no significant impact, the Fonzie's, you know, that everyone tries to get in order to build a light rail project, you know, all these things that we learned, it just continues to build.

So that's what makes me so hopeful about this plans that it's just has continued to take us to another level education and understanding not only what the city and, and some of the planners need to move this forward, but what the community needs to do in order to achieve these and who they need to approach to make sure that those governmental entities or those stakeholders are going to live out the vision that they desire for their, their community. Thanks, Victor.

And yeah, it's a non-regulatory document. Know this, this doesn't, it doesn't put a zoning overlay on anything. But one thing that is going to make this successful is the fact that it was written by the community for the community, right? So it's like a code of conduct, and it's easier to buy into that when you were part of the process. Right? And I strongly believe in that this was, this plan took a south-central approach to protect, enhance, and invest, and they highlighted the areas and points of pride. So these maps speak volumes to me as a land use planner.

And our decision-makers when they do have to hear cases, they can reference these maps, right? And these maps that can show the type of projects that are in alignment with what the community wanted. And one thing that I can see is that when you go from strategies to actions, that our money is where our mouth is, right, or that we're hitting the shovels to the ground, they're on this plan, you know, just the following month after this plan was adopted, this was, I think, what was it, April just last month or a couple of weeks after to Tod plan was adopted.

The walkable urban code was then allowed over the transit oriented corridors. So that was an amazing way. Not in the land use front, you know, it's opening up those flexible options to help share and build wealth in the community and bring those services, those needs and resources that the is seeking and wanting and calling for their plan to be allowed to do those. So even though it's, non-regulatory that, to me, you know, this plan is a guiding force and there's so many voices behind it that any decision maker that doesn't listen to, the voices that show up, or this is going to be, you know, in a world that are there.

So Victor, before we close out today, if anybody wanted to get ahold of you, you know, or the south central collaborative, do you have any contact information for that then you website that they should visit for more information? Sure. So we're, we are a true neighborhood group. So my individual email address is Viva Dallas. That's V I D A L E s3@gmail.com. And you know, love to share with anyone that is part of learning more about how their community or neighborhood could get involved in a future future infrastructure project like ours or future plan.

I'm happy to share what we did to come together and have this influence. And, and, but thank you, thank you for giving me the time to share. And we look to our continued partnership with you in the city of Phoenix and, and all those that want to see this plan become a reality. All right, don't go anywhere yet, but I'm going to give you guys my contact information too. And then I have one last question for you. So I'm ileus Valencia with the city of Phoenix. If you wanted to learn more about the south central Tod community plan and the Tod framework, please visit south just type in south central Tod.

And it will take you to the cities, to any website there. My contact information is there as well, but you can reach me via email at Elias, E L I a s.Valencia@phoenix.gov. So Victor, what is one takeaway then that you would say to give to members of the community if they wanted to get involved, what can help them to overcome that initial hurdle? Cause you know, you were saying simple and all these other terms and some people, you know, that's very intimidating. What would you say is a good piece of advice for anybody working or considering being part of a community plan?

You know, just to be open. Sometimes we can be influenced by people in the community to not participate in the process because of broken promises or because of the way a city has handled its business. In the past, we have to understand that we are the city. And so when we take that ownership and understand that ownership, it really does change things. And so even though we may not physically own some of this stuff you know, our land or our processes, that experience that you will gain from being involved will pay dividends that you probably won't even know you'll need, you know, a decade from now.

But yeah, getting involved, learning and understanding even when you're not victorious, all of it will come to maturity at the proper time. So just get involved in your neighborhood, get involved in your community, get involved in your cities and make it the best that you can make it because, you know, ultimately it's, it's yours, it's mine. You know, this is our country. This is our city and we have to do what we can to make it the best place possible to live in. Thanks Victor. And thank you. And I just wanted to add so on the community front there, it gave some better advice for all you government officials, planners, all of those involved in leading or participating part of those community plan efforts as well.

You know, in order to build trust, you have to have trust as well. So trust that the community knows what they want, trust that the community can give you sound advice. They are the local experts after all it is their neighborhood. And if you want to reduce this placement and negative effects of gentrification, then you need to listen to those voices, Victor, again, thanks for your time and being here, Sage advice, whether it's thank you. Thank you. Bye-bye bye-bye

Speaker 1 (1h 0m 23s): Thanks for joining us to listen to more shows or find more resources related to transit and livable communities. Visit us on the web@railyolution.org. If you have feedback about this podcast or ideas for topics, we should cover. Let us know, email us@podcastatrailpollution.org.