

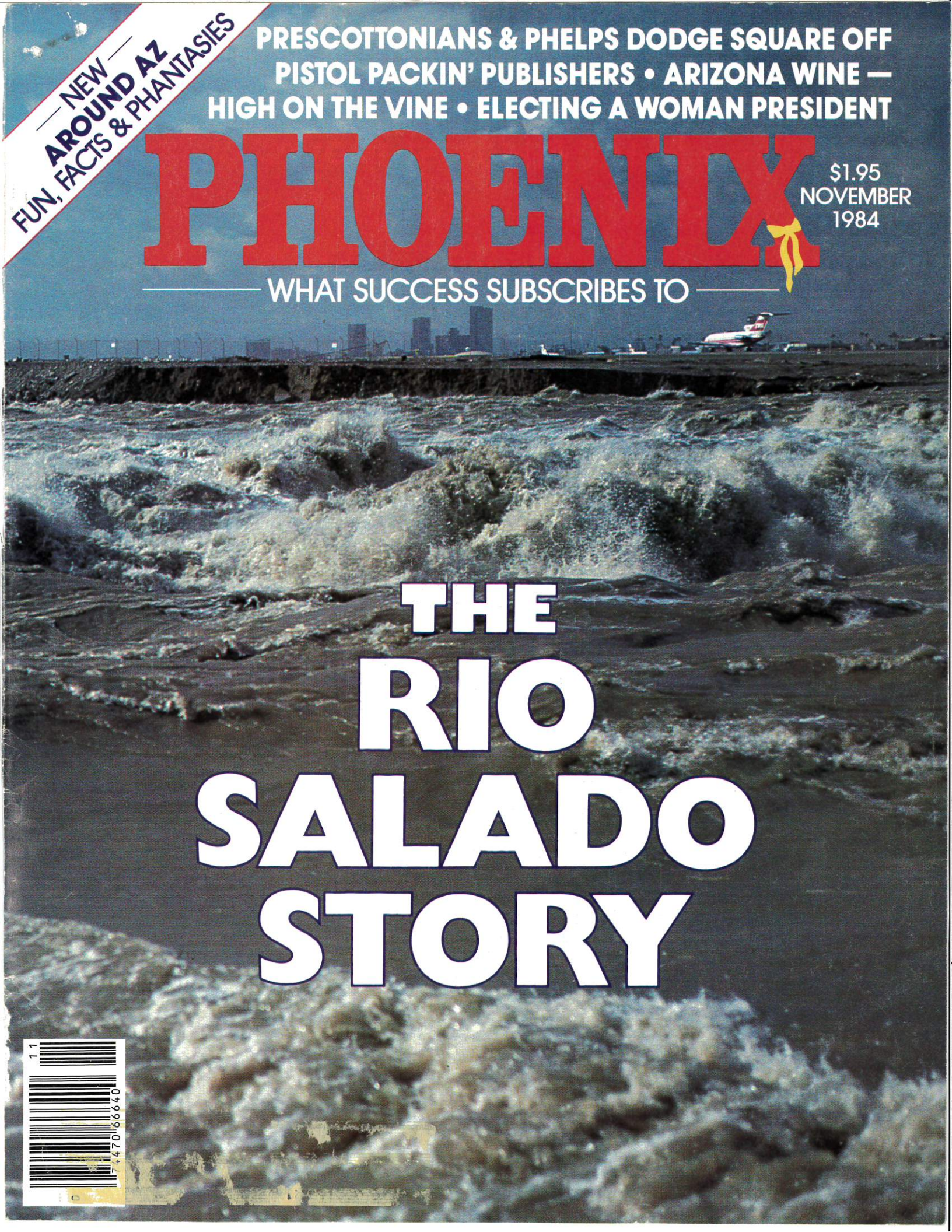
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THE RIO SALADO STORY



The Rio Salado Story

by Carrie Sears Bell

***F**or 18 years now, Valley dwellers have been hearing bits and pieces about a magnificent urban improvement project called Rio Salado. The concept, to develop metropolitan Phoenix's lifeless Salt River bed, sounded quite appealing. But few believed it would ever be more than a paper fantasy dreamed up by a group of architecture students way back when.*

Lately, however, things have changed. The few are becoming the many, and it seems more and more likely that Rio Salado will become this Valley's showplace of the future. We'd like to tell you what it's all about.



Rio Salado

Last May, the Rio Salado Development District offered a free bus tour of its project area. More than 200 people, mostly south Phoenixians, filled up three city of Phoenix buses — the kind that bend around corners. It was to be a long and dusty, but eye-opening, journey.

The tour departed from a south Phoenix community center and headed west along the south side of the dry Salt River. One of the tour guides, Dennis Davis, deputy director of Rio Salado Development District (RSDD), pointed out a mobile-home park and an adjacent junk yard. Rio Salado would make this eyesore neighborhood a “nice” residential area, he said. For about four hours, the buses skipped back and forth across the riverbed through Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa, passing dozens of junk yards, sand and gravel operations, landfills and heavy industrial compounds. In many places, houses and industry sit side by side, and residents must endure the persistent noise, dust and ugliness imposed by their productive neighbors. No one has made much effort to hide the blighted face of things.

Davis said that Rio Salado would change all of that, by upgrading some of these mixed-use areas and relocating families who live in the worst ones. As the caravan paused beside the dessicated floodplain, he asked passengers on his bus to imagine picturesque boat-covered lakes and waterways bordered by grassy banks, handsome commercial and public developments and lots of people out having fun. Most of the travelers seemed to welcome the chance to erase the wasteland panorama of messy garbage dumps, towering cement mixers and weathered industrial equipment. And they wanted to hear more about Rio Salado.

What is it exactly? The answer is there for the asking. As noted above, Rio Salado (which means “Salt River” in Spanish)

is a plan to develop the barren riverbed that divides metropolitan Phoenix into an urban focal point that benefits everyone. Master plans call for a continuous waterway featuring lakes, islands and white-water rapids set off on both sides by greenbelts full of attractive public parks, recreational facilities, parkways, restaurants, resorts, shopping malls, businesses, factories, housing, museums and cultural centers. Intensive development would stretch 17 miles from 43rd Avenue in Phoenix to Country Club Drive in Mesa, and could include a domed stadium, new state fairgrounds and an international exposition center. Rio Salado would be a vast recreational playground, unlike any other site in the world, as well as an appealing place to work and live. And it would run right through a major transportation corridor, adjacent to the Maricopa Freeway and Sky Harbor Airport.

Sounds marvelous, doesn't it? The answer is probably “yes,” until you remember what you've read about Rio Salado in the past year. Local newspaper headlines like “Selling Rio Salado: Clouds of Doubt, Distrust Obscure Vision,” “Experts Will Tackle Rio Salado ‘Nightmare,’” “Rio Salado Plan Tied to Clean Up of Dumps” and “South Phoenix Citizens Denounce Rio Salado” characterize the kind of negativity that has plagued the project in 1984. Why all the controversy? Our intent here is to tell the whole story.

History

Rio Salado was born at the Arizona State University (ASU) College of Architecture in the 1966 fall semester. At that time, professors gave 16 fifth-year design students their most challenging assignment ever: to combine flood control with environmental design in a plan that would

transform a desolate Salt River bed into a thriving urban asset.

“They tramped every foot of the riverbed on foot, horseback, by Jeep; they flew over it, took all kinds of infrared pictures and in their research found the river identified as “Rio Salado” on old maps,” recalls James Elmore, professor emeritus and former and founding dean of the College of Architecture. “An urban-design project of that scale and magnitude was a bit frustrating until they hit upon the idea of restoring life to the river by putting water back into it.”

Elmore, the students and Professor Robert McConnell (who later became dean of architecture at the University of Arizona) first presented their visionary ideas to enthusiastic business and civic leaders in March 1967. Over the next few years, other design classes worked on Rio Salado, each presenting more detailed and realistic proposals to the public.

Finally, in November 1969, about 80 of Phoenix's foremost *Who's Who*-type leaders met for a day-long Rio Salado workshop. They agreed to ask the newly formed Valley Forward Association, a group dedicated to civic progress, to make Rio Salado its pet project.

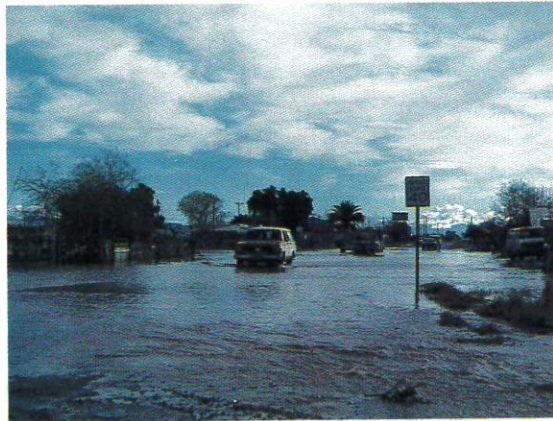
Valley Forward, with Elmore as a member, pursued Rio Salado throughout the '70s. In 1974, that group and the Maricopa Association of Governments managed to drum up enough financing for a major planning study. Completed by the Los Angeles design firm Daniel, Mann, Johnson and Mendenhall for \$85,000, this study was the first to quantify the project in layman's terms. Rio Salado backers tagged it the “blue book.”

Now Valley Forward had a tangible, understandable tool for publicizing Rio Salado. “It was a conceptual study,” says Dan Devers, Valley Forward's executive director since 1976. “It didn't get into engineer-

Only two Salt River bridges withstood 1980's 55-year flood.



Tempe's riverside streets during the 1980 flood.



Rio Salado, like Indian Bend Wash, would accommodate heavy rains.



ing, but it defined what we were after." Devers and former executive director Frank Bosh offered the study, slide shows and speeches on Rio Salado to "anyone who would listen," recalls Devers. "But, on occasion, we would get depressed."

One of those occasions was in 1975, when Phoenix voters nixed a \$1.95 million bond issue to begin the project's first phase. For some reason, Rio Salado hadn't caught on with the public. As a result, it remained little more than a conversation piece until 1979.

That year, apartment mogul Bill Schulz got fed up with just talking about it. Schulz, who'd been studying Rio Salado alternatives since 1975, and Dennis Davis, then chief of planning at the state Office of Economic Planning and Development (OEPAD), drafted a bill to establish a Rio Salado Development District patterned after the San Diego Development Authority — the group that turned San Diego's Mission Bay into a thriving resort-recreation area. In the process, they consulted with city officials from Phoenix, Tempe and Mesa. Then, in January 1980, Schulz and other Valley Forward members presented the bill to the state legislature. After much lobbying and amending, the measure squeaked through on the last night of the 1980 session.

By legislative definition, Rio Salado Development District includes the 100-year floodplain and adjoining lands that run through Phoenix, Tempe, Mesa, Maricopa County and the Salt River Pima-Maricopa and Gila River Indian communities. Altogether, the district spans almost 40 miles. It is run by an appointed nine-member board of directors — three from Phoenix, two from Tempe, one from Mesa and one each chosen by the governor, the senate president and the house speaker. To get the district board started on preliminary and master plans, the legis-

Rio Salado would be a large greenbelt like Indian Bend Wash.



lature appropriated \$500,000.

Since then, the cities and county have contributed another \$500,000, and a private think-tank foundation called the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy has donated \$150,000. With those funds, the district board has slowly hired a staff, leased offices, contracted a master plan through the Massachusetts design firm Carr-Lynch Associates and is currently attempting to get public monies that will, at last, enable them to start realizing the Rio Salado dream.

The Plan

And what is the dream, according to the current 25-year master plan? Except for some refinements and new numbers, the concept remains the same. According to Carr-Lynch, Rio Salado is a \$1 billion, 10,000-acre project that encompasses 4,330 acres of private development, 2,945 acres of parks and recreation areas, 1,525 acres of lakes and streams, 600 acres of sedimentation basin and 470 acres of parkways. "There's no other project on this scale in the United States," says Tim Bray, RSDD's executive director. "I wouldn't call it experimental, it's just bigger than other redevelopment projects."

Besides greenbelts, parks, waterways and developments, the plan would create:

- An estimated 74,000 new jobs
- Approximately \$5.2 billion in new tax revenues for the affected cities, county and state in its first 50 years
- An eightfold to tenfold increase in RSDD land values in the first 20 years
- A source of civic pride, a local identity and an urban nucleus that metro Phoenix now lacks
- Public control of land that would have evolved as private investors saw fit following inevitable upstream flood control.

The Obstacles

Again, it sounds like a project no one could dislike. But even Eden had its problems, and so does Rio Salado. The project's major stumbling blocks are upstream flood control, adequate funding, toxic landfills and acquiring widespread public support.

Let's begin with flood control. The Carr-Lynch plan requires construction and improvement of upstream dams to reduce the estimated 100-year flood from 200,000 cubic feet per second (cfs) to 55,000 cfs in the Salt River channel that cuts through metro Phoenix. Phoenix



needs flood control regardless of Rio Salado. The "ocean" that appears on this magazine's cover is a 1980 Salt River flood that cut our Valley in two. Authorities called that one a 55-year flood. An actual 100-year flood, without more and larger upstream reservoirs to contain it, could be truly devastating.

"I can't imagine that the ninth-largest city in the country is going to permit a situation where you have a disastrous flood go right through the middle of your city," says Jim Pederson, chairman of the RSDD board. "We were lulled into a false sense of security between the early '40s and the middle '60s because there wasn't a drop of water that went down that river. Then we had a series of wet years, and all hell broke loose. The logic argument says we can't permit that to happen for the lack of a quarter of a billion dollars."

That's about how much Arizona might have to pay for Plan 6 of the Central Arizona Water Control Study, the billion-dollar-plus Central Arizona Project (CAP) water-storage system endorsed by the U.S. Department of Interior. Plan 6 would mean a New Waddell Dam at Lake Pleasant on the Agua Fria River; an improved Stewart Mountain Dam at Saguaro Lake on the Salt; a raised Roosevelt Dam with double its current storage capacity; and an earthen Cliff Dam on the Verde River between Bartlett and Horseshoe reservoirs.

The federal government has OK'd Plan 6 except for the Cliff Dam area, where environmental-impact studies are underway to determine whether the dam would ruin the nesting grounds of a few desert bald eagles, an endangered species. Several environmental groups, including the Sierra Club and the Audubon Society, oppose the \$350 million dam. But RSDD backers believe that it will be approved and that the eagles can be protected.

"I think they'll just construct the dam so it won't affect the eagles," says Tim Bray. "You really can't relocate them. They live all up and down that river." He contends that the dam could potentially help the eagles by guaranteeing a continuous flowing stream with a greater fish population than the sometimes dry Verde River now offers.

Another snag in Plan 6 is funding. No one yet knows how much money the state, the county, the cities and RSDD might be expected to pay for flood control. Once

Rio Salado

that issue is settled, however, work on the dams could be completed in about 10 years — years in which RSDD would acquire the land within its boundaries and begin developing areas outside the 100-year floodplain.

As the Salt is, for the most part, a dry river, Rio Salado proposes to utilize poor-quality ground water early on, shifting to treated sewage effluent as the project matures to accommodate its lakes, flowing streams and drought-tolerant foliage.

But before work can begin, the district must establish a reliable funding source. This is its key objective for the coming year. The question is, how ought RSDD acquire funding? The master plan suggests tax-increment financing (TIF), a controversial money-raising method practiced in 26 other states. TIF creates funds for public projects by allocating them the new tax revenues from privately improved properties in the project areas. This is how it would work for Rio Salado:

- Turning Rio Salado into a tax-increment-finance district would require a change in the state constitution. That means that the state legislature would have to support a bill putting the proposed change on a ballot for statewide voter approval.
- Once granted TIF status, RSDD would sell bonds to finance land acquisition and an initial construction phase.
- New Rio Salado development — parks and recreation facilities, for example — would attract new private developers, who would purchase (from RSDD) and improve what used to be almost worthless land.
- The increments of new property taxes (estimated at \$944 million over 25 years) generated by the increasingly valuable privately owned land would go to RSDD to

pay off the bonds and fund more public improvements.

- Land acquired by RSDD and leased to the private sector would yield a projected \$348 million.
- Rio Salado would gain approximately \$75 million by selling land to private developers.
- All told, TIF would provide Rio Salado with \$1.367 billion in new revenues against total project costs of \$998 million.
- At the same time, schools, cities and local agencies — the usual beneficiaries of new taxes — would continue to receive tax revenues based on the assessed valuation of lands prior to TIF.

Sound a little complicated? Legislative leaders, who were asked to support RSDD's bid to gain TIF designation last session, thought so. And many lobby groups, including the Phoenix Chamber of Commerce, argued that TIF has been abused in other states, and could hurt schools by depriving them of new revenues.

In the end, RSDD's 1984 effort to gain TIF status failed 1) because problems with AHCCCS (Arizona Health Care Cost Containment System) virtually monopolized the legislative session, 2) because TIF is confusing and controversial and 3) because the Phoenix Chamber suggested a simpler funding strategy that will be presented for legislative approval in 1985.

The new idea, which everyone seems to like, is to give RSDD the county-wide taxing authority to levy up to a 25-cent property tax per every \$100 of assessed valuation. "That seems to be becoming the clearest method for financing this project that people can understand," says Bray. "On an average house with an assessed value of \$50,000, it's gonna add \$8.75 to your annual property-tax bill."

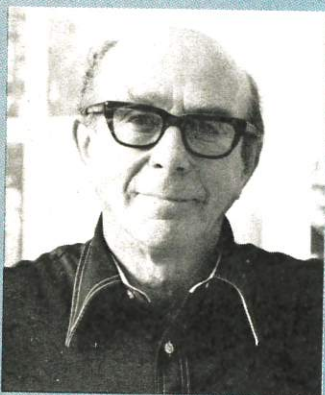
Estimates say the 25-cent tax would

provide Rio Salado with \$17 million in the first year. But the obvious question is why should taxpayers who live outside the Valley support such a tax? The answer, Bray says, is that Rio Salado will add about \$1 billion to the county's tax base over the next 25 years, benefitting everyone in Maricopa County.

As for tax-increment financing, it remains on hold at least until people can comprehend it and believe that RSDD would not abuse it. "It may be a future use of the district," says Bray. "We're talking two to four to six years from now. It has to be put on the ballot and people have to understand what it means to the average homeowner, to businesses and to schools."

For right now, getting the county-wide taxing authority this session is, in the minds of most RSDD backers, crucial. One of them is Jim Pederson, who explains that imminent flood control will make riverbed land values escalate and spur development. Therefore, he reasons, whether that development is controlled by the public (under Rio Salado) or the private sector must soon be decided.

"It's important that we acquire that land before Plan 6 raises property values," says Pederson. "But from a timing and political standpoint, if after all the effort we've put into Rio Salado the county-wide taxing authority still doesn't get through the state legislature — with the support of the chamber, the major business interests, the south Phoenix community and dozens of civic and community groups — I don't know what else to do." Rio Salado would be set back at least three or four years, and people would begin to doubt that it will ever be realized, he adds. "This year [1985] is a turning point for the project."



"I think that Rio Salado is our greatest hope of achieving a manmade feature with which Phoenix can be identified, the way San Francisco is with the Golden Gate Bridge and New York is with Central Park."

—Jim Elmore
Founder and Former Dean of the Arizona State University College of Architecture, and Rio Salado Development District Board Member.



"Rio Salado was fine as long as it was just a pretty picture up on the wall. It made everybody happy. But when you say, 'OK, now how are we gonna pay for it?', that causes controversy. I am not turned off by the controversy. I welcome it because that means there's discussion going on."

—Jim Pederson
Chairman, Rio Salado Development District Board.

At least one man disagrees with Pederson and his board. He is Bill Schulz, the guy who made millions as an apartment developer, lost by a hair in his impressive 1980 bid to unseat Senator Barry Goldwater and earlier this year announced that he's running for governor in 1986.

Rio Salado might not have gotten this far without Schulz's dogged persistence. After all, he went to the legislature to get the RSDD created in the first place. But Schulz is frustrated with the way his brainchild district has turned out.

Take the board of directors, for example. Schulz says the board originally was intended to be a group of individuals with advanced real estate know-how, capable of engineering the best possible development plans for the public. "Everybody agreed that this was what was needed for Rio Salado," says Schulz. "It was not to be some park commission, because this project takes very sophisticated real estate knowledge to put together. We don't have federal money flowing like we did with Indian Bend [Scottsdale's blue-ribbon greenbelt project]. We've got to do Rio Salado through our own resources."

Because most of them lack extensive real estate skills, Schulz believes that RSDD's board and staff members are the wrong people for the job. And time and again he has disagreed with their decisions:

- When he became the board's real estate advisor in 1981, he said, "You're supposed to be an effective real estate developer on behalf of the public. The first thing a developer does is get control of his land." But the first thing the board did was commission a master plan. Schulz says the plan was a waste of money, since it will be obsolete by the time development begins and will inflate the value of land Rio Salado has yet to acquire. Pederson and

Bray insist, however, that the plan was essential to gain public input and support for the project.

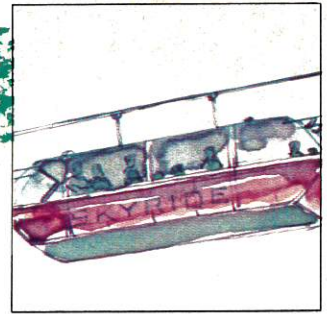
- The board advocates the county-wide taxing authority and TIF to pay for Rio Salado. Schulz opposes taxation in favor of land exchange, a potentially cost-effective, complex land-acquisition process that makes tax-increment financing seem simple.

As briefly as possible, land exchange involves swapping six privately owned riverbed land tracts for publicly owned land of equal value in rural Arizona. The major riverbed landowner in each swap would be a sand and gravel operator. And each riverbed tract to be traded would be valued at about \$30 million to \$35 million. When the swap begins, a sand and gravel operator trades for rural land that he doesn't want. Then Rio Salado buys that rural land from him for cash, and turns around and sells it to a private investor.

Rio Salado gets a low-interest loan from the state to pay the sand and gravel operator, and settles with the state when the land is resold. All the lands are appraised, the riverbed landowners are amenable to the terms and RSDD has a private buyer for the rural land before the transaction occurs.

When the swaps are complete, Rio Salado leases the riverbed land (now part of the state land trust) back to the sand and gravel operator for as long as he likes, planting foliage to shield the unsightly works from view and generating revenues for Rio Salado. Thus Rio Salado gets control of its land without taxation, gains lease income and creates private taxable land (from what was public land) for rural counties.

If one can digest all of that and envision the tax-free benefits, land exchange could



appear more desirable than taxation. "The exchange avoids \$200 million in taxes," says Schulz. It would also mean \$8 million in annual leaseback monies from the sand and gravel operators. But a process that is difficult to understand is even more difficult to believe in.

Maybe that's why the board has never supported the idea. "It just scares them to death, because that just isn't within the scope of their background or experience," says Schulz. "So they're trying to find alternatives to stay away from it. The net effect is that the interest of the taxpayer, in my opinion, isn't really being taken into account."

Pederson says, however, that the board "didn't think there was any way in the world you could acquire the land through land exchange." He and Bray feel certain that they can convince taxpayers that Rio Salado's long-term benefits are well worth the extra taxes.

- To bolster the board's real estate skills, Schulz convinced its members to establish a real estate advisory group composed of 10 of the Valley's most experienced real estate people: Schulz, Bert Apker, Jim Simmons, Charles Dunlap, James Freeman, Gerald Jacobs, Russ Lyon, Jr., Donald D. Myers, Joseph L. Refsnes and Walt Winius, Jr. Schulz has even suggested, without success, that the board be expanded to include the advisory group.

Despite all of their differences, Schulz and the board do share a commitment to

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"If it turns out like they want, it would be great. Some people here in south Phoenix really can't afford to move to a better home. This will give them a chance to. I've lived here since 1960, and raised my children here, and I really don't want to move out of south Phoenix. I have even told my husband, 'Wouldn't it be nice to look across the street and see that [Rio Salado]?'"

—Eloise Ortiz
Resident, south Phoenix.

"The current plan offers immediate results. Rio Salado's major problem is how little public awareness there is about how this project could give the city a core, a heart. The concern seems to be for and among the citizens of the immediate [project] area. Of course, they're going to be directly affected, but the whole city is going to benefit."

—Bill Close, Jr.
ASU College of Architecture graduate who helped originate Rio Salado.

"What's going on in Phoenix is what's happening all over the U.S.: Bad land-use planning by the city and by real estate developers, who think it's OK to put people in flood plains and that mother nature will never reclaim that river. Every year Rio Salados are built all over the U.S. Every year, claims for flood damages increase."

—Robert Witzeman, M.D.
Past President, Audubon Society.

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seeing Rio Salado through. That commitment has enabled them to patch up their disagreements. Schulz, who last winter went to the legislature and lobbied against TIF, says he feels no animosity toward the board and will not oppose its efforts to get legislative approval of a county-wide taxing authority. Pederson, speaking for the board that last spring released Schulz as its real estate advisor, says Schulz is "a man we hope totally to have on our side as we move forward in this project."

As Jim Elmore points out, problems and strife inevitably arise on a project of Rio Salado's magnitude. "Rio Salado has enjoyed a favorable youth, and now it's got growing pains," he says. "For so long, it was just an idea, an image, a vision sufficiently defined to get people excited but not to make anybody mad. Now we're getting far enough along to make some people mad, and we have to deal with those things."

As if flood control and funding aren't enough of a challenge, RSDD also faces a few other obstacles: toxic landfills in the riverbed, and concerned south Phoenicians who must be assured that Rio Salado has their best interests at heart. Both of these issues became front-page news items early this year, just as RSDD sought legislative approval of TIF, and shortly after it released its Carr-Lynch master plan. State health officials, hearing of the plan, reported that the river bed contains at least 24 toxic landfills. Meanwhile, previously uninformed south Phoenicians learned that Rio Salado was considering relocating some of its neighborhoods and upgrading others.

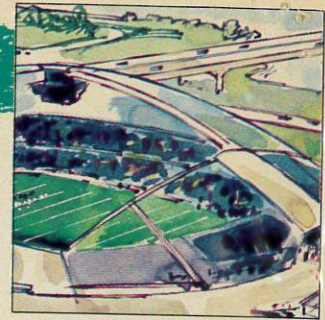
Barraged with questions from worried, angry and skeptical citizens, RSDD had a lot of explaining to do. Mayor Goddard and the Phoenix City Council became concerned enough to appoint a special 15-member ad hoc committee to find out what south Phoenicians had to say about

Rio Salado. After three months of study, they made the following recommendations:

- RSDD should minimize relocation of families and homes.
- It should be funded in part, by a county-wide taxing authority that would terminate in 25 years.
- It should not be funded by TIF.
- It should, during the first full year of funding, create a detailed plan to clean up hazardous-waste dumpsites in the riverbed.
- It should keep meeting with and informing south Phoenicians about Rio Salado's progress. (RSDD last spring hired Aaron Kizer as its staff legal counsel, to act as a liaison with the south Phoenix communities and to coordinate relocations and "facelifts" there.)
- RSDD should work more closely with the city of Phoenix as the project moves ahead.
- Employers in the district should implement affirmative-action policies to assure south Phoenicians fair consideration for new jobs in the area.
- Rio Salado should build a community college near Central Bridge rather than a stadium or cultural center.

Rio Salado Development District has responded positively to these suggestions, and is receiving additional remarks from Tempe and Mesa. Tempe's city council has already approved the Carr-Lynch plan, and Mesa is expected to follow suit shortly. Both east Valley cities have formed Rio Salado advisory groups, and Tempe is developing its own plan to mesh with the master plan.

"Very few of the objections that were voiced are things that we can't live with," says Pederson. "We're concerned about relocation. I've said many times before that the project can live without any relocation whatsoever." RSDD has said the neighborhoods will be asked to decide whether they want to be relocated, and that those who



choose relocation will be provided with housing equivalent to their current residences.

The district also expects to lead the way in dealing with the toxic-waste problem. "We can't have a project if there are carcinogenic wastes two feet below the surface of a park or one of our facilities," says Pederson. "We have to get the political ball rolling to address the problem. . . . It's gonna take a lot of money. Hopefully, the EPA can take care of a lot of that for us through their Superfund. But whatever it costs, we have to take care of it."

Although this attitude might not sound like that of a group of irresponsible, self-interested developers, some critics have referred to Rio Salado as an ill-conceived "developer's playground." RSDD's board and staff hope to dispel such negativity with an intensive publicity campaign this fall and winter. "It's usually a vocal minority that objects to progress and a silent majority that is satisfied," says Bray. "What we need to do now is stimulate interest in that majority out there and ask them to step forward and support Rio Salado."

Jim Elmore, the "father of Rio Salado," believes the project will give Phoenix an identifiable focal point akin to San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge, New York's Central Park and San Diego's Mission Bay. "We have our great desert and mountains and sunshine and all that the good Lord gave us, but we really haven't done a lot yet in a conceptual urban way. I think Rio Salado could give form, character and identity to this Valley we love so much."

PM

"Rio Salado has to have a big dash of entrepreneurial spirit, which it doesn't have now. An entrepreneur is a practical person who is confronted with these obstacles and figures ways to get the job done. Because there are problems, and it's gonna be a tremendous community achievement to make Rio Salado happen."

—Bill Schulz
Rio Salado Association
member.

"There's a world of problems down there that need to be faced and dealt with now. Rio Salado is a glorious possibility, not only for cleaning up the river, but for making it livable, creating jobs. But I'll fight tooth and nail against building parks over [untreated] landfills."

—Greg Gearing
Pastor, Southern Baptist
Temple, south Phoenix.

"Any major project of this magnitude begins with an idea that gains momentum and people begin to look at it and say 'Can it work?' That's the stage we're at now. We're saying, 'Yes it can.' The organization is there and the land planning is there. It's getting it all put together and getting all the approval that's difficult."

—Tim Bray
Executive Director, Rio Salado
Development District.

"We're seeing a different attitude from the board members and the city. People know they have to play ball or this thing is not going to get off the ground. Now, the Rio Salado Development District is trying to work with the people there [in south Phoenix]."

—Armando Ruiz
Legislator from south Phoenix.