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## **City of Casa Grande Intergovernmental Agreements for Future Boundaries**

The American poet Robert Frost wrote many years ago, “good fences make good neighbors.” The City of Casa Grande believes well thought out, proactive agreements will ultimately make good neighbors and has put that belief into practice by negotiating intergovernmental agreements with neighboring cities to establish ultimate municipal boundaries.

From time to time over the past 30 or so years, officials from the cities of Casa Grande, Coolidge and Eloy have discussed annexation strategies, spheres of influence and the potential city limits of each community. Aggressive annexation moves by the City of Eloy in the early 1980s brought a defensive response from Casa Grande and resulted in several meetings between elected officials and staff members of the communities, along with representatives from Pinal County. As a product of those regional “summits,” informal agreements were made concerning future annexation strategies that served the communities well until 2004 when planned development in unincorporated areas became significant and the City of Coolidge began to pursue potential annexations beyond what had been discussed in earlier years.

Recognizing the need to be able to predict ultimate build-out population and to plan for future infrastructure development due to unprecedented growth trends (being located in the fastest growing county in the nation), Casa Grande City Manager Jim Thompson, with the support of Mayor and Council, actively engaged representatives of Coolidge and Eloy along with the newer City of Maricopa in discussions of projected city limits with the eventual goal being the development of intergovernmental agreements defining future boundaries with each community.

As the City of Casa Grande embarked on this process in late 2004, Pinal County was just beginning to experience substantial residential growth after years as a rural agrarian community. From 2004 through 2006, the area experienced what came to be known as 'hypergrowth' with cities growing exponentially in size. The City of Maricopa, for example, grew from a population of 4,491 in 2004 to more than 35,000 today. This was a time of untold prosperity for western Pinal County and the City of Casa Grande's vision for the future ensured each city had their fair share of the claim based on mutually-agreed upon boundaries solidified by intergovernmental agreements.

Over the last 36 months, agreements have been negotiated and approved between all four cities, with the City of Eloy agreement most recently approved in January 2008. It is believed that Casa Grande is the first city in the state of Arizona to negotiate boundary agreements with all neighboring cities and perhaps the single largest collaborative planning effort in the nation based on land area.

These intergovernmental agreements establish mutual understandings regarding possible future locations of the city limits of each community and provide municipal leaders with clear guidelines for consideration of annexation petitions and an understanding of when annexations are to be deferred to a neighboring community. These contracts also recognize that citizens on either side of the established boundaries cannot be prohibited from seeking annexation from one community or the other. To the extent possible by law, the cities who are parties to the agreements will not seek annexation petitions from citizens on the side of the boundaries opposite each city's respective side of the boundary. Language in the agreements requires their

reaffirmation with the election of any new City Council member in one of the communities.

Because these agreements are immaterial, it is difficult to speak of their results in monetary terms. However, there is no doubt that these pacts have saved each of the municipalities from the possibility of expensive lawsuits related to annexation wars. What is more easily defined and recognized is the potential for improving the quality of life for citizens present and future through the opportunities arising from these agreements.

With this new mutual understanding, each community can now master plan an area far greater than their current municipal boundaries – in the case of Casa Grande alone this is a planning area of over 230 square miles. By determining population and development projections for the entire planning area, these four cities can more effectively plot utility and transportation systems as well as the need and location for future community facilities. Each community also now has the ability to work with Pinal County officials to ensure that the infrastructure being developed in currently unincorporated areas matches future plans as set forth by the community, thus alleviating future City taxpayers of any financial burden related to having to ‘re-build’ inadequate systems as areas are annexed into the City limits.

The ultimate lesson for the City of Casa Grande has truly been that good fences do make good neighbors. Prior to these agreements, the City had entered into several annexation battles with neighboring entities. However, since the agreements have been finalized each municipality has a comprehensive understanding of ‘who gets what,’ thus averting any conflicts. Casa Grande officials would also encourage other municipalities

who might consider implementing similar agreements to ‘never give up.’ While the agreements with Coolidge and Maricopa were quickly and easily negotiated, the Eloy agreement looked as though it might never happen. However, with renewed enthusiasm the City of Casa Grande sought out Eloy once again in 2007 and their agreement was finalized in early 2008.

Completion of this project has opened many avenues for discussion that were previously unexplored, expanding the City’s original vision into a total transformation of thought and process for each of the four communities involved. The City of Casa Grande is now engaging with these entities to determine the possibilities for regional solutions to issues and problems where joint projects might make economic and/or environmental sense (such as water production, treatment and distribution or wastewater collection and treatment). Solutions are also being discussed in terms of regional connectivity related to all modes of transportation, including pedestrian and bike trails. Through this cooperative effort, services can be provided in more efficient and effective ways for all citizens.

For an area that is projected to transform into one of the country’s ten largest ‘megapolitans’ over the next twenty to thirty years, the vision and foresight shown by the City of Casa Grande, coupled with the commitment of three neighboring communities and cooperation from Pinal County, ensures that both present and future citizens are provided with a wealth of opportunities that might have otherwise gone unrecognized.