

As rural western towns grow, so do their planning challenges

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Nestled among state parks, red rock buttes and breathtaking mountain vistas, Sedona, Arizona, is one of the most popular resort towns in the American West.

Today, many Sedona visitors and residents frequently find themselves stuck in traffic, struggling to find parking or encountering crowds of people in the wilderness. Increased tourism might be one of the reasons for these issues, but another is a large commuter workforce, according to a new study by researchers at the University of Arizona and University of Utah.

Census data shows that of the roughly 7,000 jobs in Sedona, about 5,000 of them—74% - are held by people who live outside the city limits in larger towns, such as Flagstaff and the Phoenix metropolitan area, or in adjacent rural communities in the Verde Valley. For some of those commuters, living in Sedona isn't an option due to a cost of living their jobs can't support, the researchers found.

Sedona's story is indicative of a trend unfolding in many rural gateway communities across the American West, according to the new study, which is published in the *Journal of the American Planning Association*. Booming tourism and a steady increase in new residents present unprecedented urban planning challenges.

Quantifying Years of Anecdotal Evidence

Planners, residents and public officials in gateway communities—which also include Bisbee, Arizona; Jackson, Wyoming; and Moab, Utah—have for years seen anecdotal evidence of the planning challenges that accompany population and tourism growth. The new study sought to quantify those challenges, said lead author Philip Stoker, assistant professor in the UArizona School of Landscape Architecture and Planning in the College of Architecture, Planning and Landscape Architecture.

"Personally, I've just noticed it from going to all these places," said Stoker, an expert on urban water use and natural resource management

whose research focuses on the western U.S. "Moab, Utah, is one of my favorites and it's been highly impacted, so I had kind of a personal motivation to do this."

Stoker and his collaborators conducted in-depth interviews with 33 public officials and surveyed more than 300 others from about 1,500 gateway communities across the western U.S., which did not include coastal communities. Officials were asked specific questions about their communities' planning challenges and opportunities.

The researchers did not interview or survey residents of the communities they studied—only public officials. The reasons for that were both logistic and strategic, Stoker said: Officials' email addresses were public record and they were therefore easier to contact. But getting feedback from officials also meant that the study's data came from people who had strong knowledge of their communities' development challenges.

Housing Affordability, 'Small-town-ness' Were Major Issues

Among the study's most significant findings: Issues related to housing affordability were top-of-mind, "pervasive and urgent" for nearly all survey respondents and interviewees. Nearly 83% of respondents reported that housing affordability was either "moderately problematic," "very problematic" or "extremely problematic." Nearly all interviewees called housing affordability a key issue for their communities.

Home buyers from larger cities were a major factor in the rising cost of housing in gateway communities, Stoker said. Many people from large metropolitan areas have turned to gateway communities for retirement, vacation homes and—increasingly—remote work, Stoker said. With their larger incomes, they were willing to pay more for properties,

causing prices for surrounding properties to go up.

"If you've been living there and growing up in this community and you don't have a job that's paying the salary of someone who's in, for example, downtown Seattle, you're going to be excluded from this community and your ability to invest in land and property if you haven't already," Stoker said.

Respondents also said they were concerned about the effects of growth on their communities' character or "small-town-ness," a quality that nearly 94% of survey respondents said was important.

On the other hand, the study found that roughly 12% of the communities studied were shrinking in population, which came with a new set of problems—a dwindling tax base that led to less money for infrastructure improvements and other crucial expenses.

Tourism Not a Pressing Issue, Most Officials Said

One finding that came as a surprise to the researchers: Reported tensions between long-term residents and tourists or between long-term residents and short-term residents were lower than expected. Only 16% of survey respondents said too much tourism was "extremely problematic."

Interviewees talked about their "love-hate relationship" with tourism, and also called it a "double-edge sword" because of the economic benefits it brings.

"One of the anecdotal things we were hearing about is there's always this kind of old-timer-versus-newcomer dynamic in these communities," Stoker said. "Public officials across the questionnaire didn't report that it was as serious as we thought."

The caveat with that finding is that it came from [public officials](#), Stoker

said, adding that average citizens may have reported stronger tensions.

Implementing Solutions

Stoker co-authored the study with Lindsey Romaniello, who earned her master's degree in urban planning from the University of Arizona in May; Danya Rumore, director of the Environmental Dispute Resolution Program at the University of Utah; and Zacharia Levine, a Ph.D. student at the University of Utah.

Romaniello found out about the study during a class Stoker was teaching and immediately wanted to be involved.

"It was exactly up my alley and what I wanted to study," said Romaniello, a native of Ridgway, Colorado, near the famous ski-resort town of Telluride—another gateway community identified in the study.

"I'm mostly interested in rural places and rural community planning, specifically mountain towns and resort towns," added Romaniello, who is now a planner for Missoula County in Montana. "It was exactly what I was interested in."

Researchers hope they can use the feedback they've collected to call attention to the need for proactive planning in gateway communities.

"Our goal here was that if we can identify the problems, our next step is looking at what strategies can help these communities maintain and adapt to growth as it happens, and then control growth, too, so that it's not just happening to them," Stoker said.

Many communities are already getting to work, he added. Nearly all of the growth and planning issues identified in the study are regional issues, meaning that communities in the same areas should work together to

tackle them, he said.

More information: Philip Stoker et al, Planning and Development Challenges in Western Gateway Communities, *Journal of the American Planning Association* (2020). [DOI: 10.1080/01944363.2020.1791728](https://doi.org/10.1080/01944363.2020.1791728)

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