

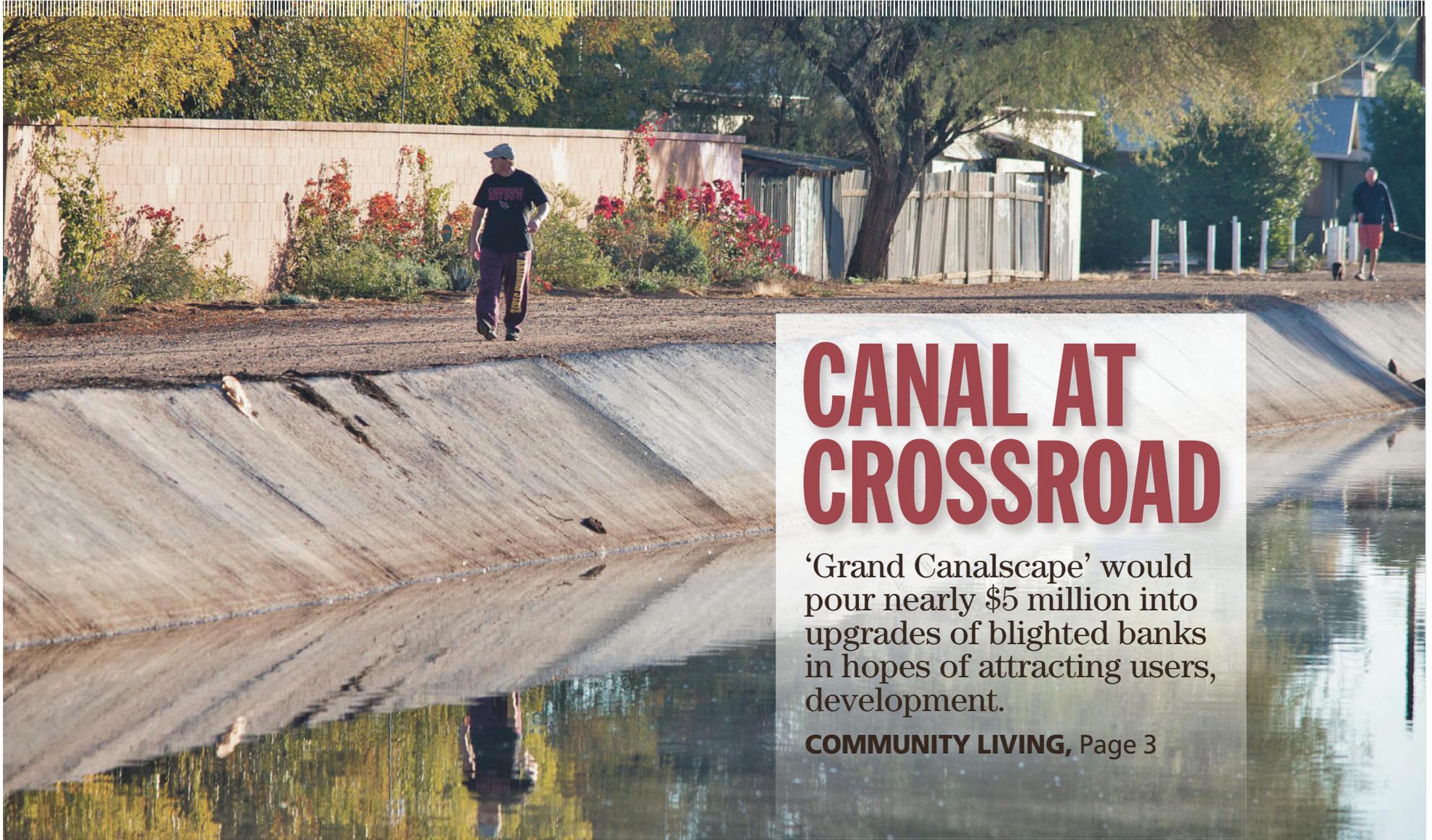


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CANAL AT CROSSROAD

'Grand Canalscape' would pour nearly \$5 million into upgrades of blighted banks in hopes of attracting users, development.

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Blighted Grand Canal banks, like this where Mark Trusiak walks, are regarded as neglected, back-alley eyesores. A \$5 million city enhancement plan might change that.

MARK HENLE/THE REPUBLIC

\$5M canal upgrade coming soon

DUSTIN GARDINER

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A woman with a black cattle dog on a short leash anxiously looks side to side as she waits for a break in traffic to cross the street and continue her walk on a recent morning along the Grand Canal.

She steps onto Seventh Avenue as the flow of cars briefly lets up. But halfway across the six-lane thoroughfare, she appears to realize she's misjudged the speed of an oncoming sedan and yanks her dog back, leaving them both stranded in the center turn lane.

After the vehicle passes, the woman and dog sprint across, only seconds before another onslaught of vehicles.

Phoenix's miles and miles of canal banks are a popular recreation and commuting route for pedestrians and bikers but an increasing volume of canal-bank traffic has raised safety concerns and calls for aesthetic improvements, according to city planners.

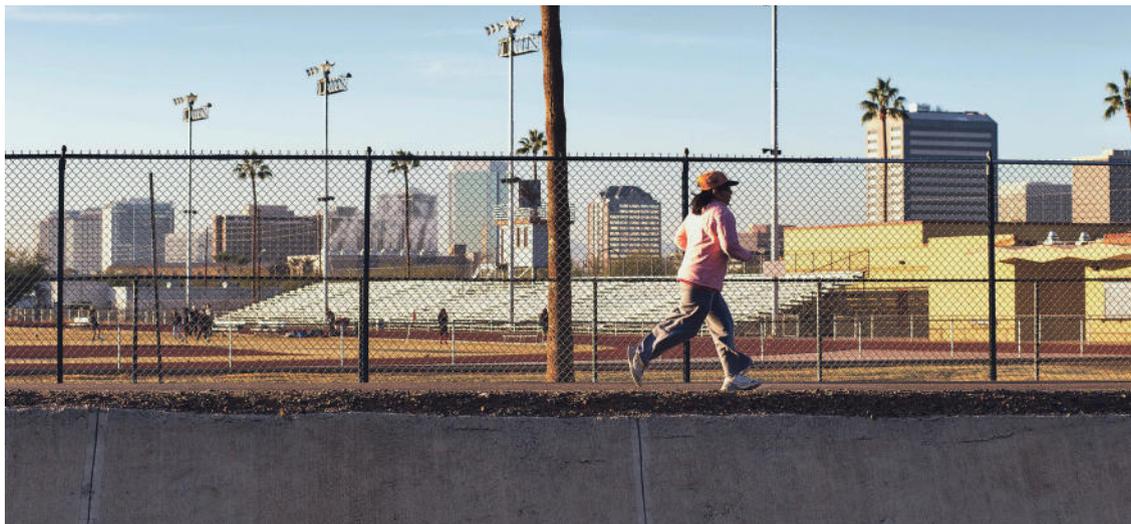
To meet the demands of canal users, Phoenix has announced plans to pour nearly \$5 million into upgrades along the Grand Canal in the uptown area and near Phoenix Sky Harbor International Airport. The money would pay for crosswalks and stop lights where the waterway meets major roads, a paved pathway, lighting and public-art installations.

The City Council still must authorize any contracts before work can begin.

It's part of a broader vision to restore Phoenix' blighted canals, once a focal point of community life in the city, as an alluring ribbon of oases in the Sonoran Desert.

"Enough about cars," said architect Stephen Thompson, who has pushed for canal improvements as part of the advocacy group Arizona Forward. "Let's talk about people."

Supporters of this ambitious vision for Phoenix's canals have labeled their effort the "Grand Canalscape." They hope to im-



MARK HENLE/THE REPUBLIC

An increase in traffic on canal banks has raised safety concerns.

prove the canal along its entire stretch from central Phoenix to Tempe, and to attract waterfront development.

The vision of lively canal paths might sound far-fetched to some residents, given the negative reputation of the blighted areas. The trash and graffiti-strewn canal often is treated as a back alley of the region.

City planners and advocates from Arizona Forward, an association of business and civic leaders, say improvements that attract more people to the Grand Canal are the first step toward creating a unique urban place. They say it is counter-intuitive for a desert metropolis to ignore an asset like flowing water.

Urban connector

For now, the project's emphasis is using the canal as a corridor for pedestrians and bicyclists because the pathways provide an efficient route to navigate parts of central Phoenix without a car.

A trepidation that many have is the lack of safe and convenient crossings where the canal intersects major streets, such as Seventh Avenue and Seventh Street.

The eight-mile stretch of the

canal from uptown Phoenix to Tempe has few crosswalks. Signalized crossings often are a block or more from the canal, an inconvenience that many skip and instead flirt with danger attempting to cross.

As part of the "Grand Canalscape," the city would make crossings more visible by moving stoplights or adding a special pedestrian-activated traffic light mid-block. Less-prominent crossings will receive extra signage.

The first phase would focus on the Grand Canal in two areas: uptown Phoenix, from 15th Avenue to 16th Street, and Gateway North, from Garfield to Van Buren streets near the airport. Construction is expected to start in spring 2016 and could take several months.

Phoenix is selecting teams to design the crossings and create public art. Much of the \$4.9 million cost would come from the Salt River Project. The Valley utility company operates the canals and provides money for cities to make aesthetic improvements, in this case \$4.2 million.

The city would cover the remaining \$700,000 of the project with revenue it receives from the state for street projects and bond funds, said Kerry Wilcoxon, a city traffic engineer.

Wilcoxon said the project would help change how residents regard the canals. It would include upgrades meant to make the canals feel safer and more welcoming. Other improvements could include lighting, pedestrian bridges, neighborhood access points, shade structures, seating and minimal landscaping.

"The explicit goal of this project is to drive canal pedestrian-bike volume up to the point where it rivals any street in town," Wilcoxon said.

The city is looking to spend as much as \$500,000 on the public-art component of the project. Canal advocates have discussed ways to better distinguish bridges, perhaps through the art installations, so motorists realize when they are driving over a canal.

Unlike the Arizona Canal to the north, the Grand Canal has seen few improvements over the years. Safe crossings are not an issue along much of the Arizona Canal because numerous pedestrian underpasses have been built.

The Grand Canal improvement effort is part of a major push by the city to reinvent its urban corridor along the light-rail line. Dubbed "Reinvent PHX," the project includes

plans to transform areas where the canal crosses rail lines, creating urban hubs that celebrate the iconic waterways.

Residents who have commented on the planning effort have listed canal development and improvements as a top priority.

Forgotten asset

For advocates of the "canalscape" concept, the goal is to restore the Valley's canals to their prized status. They are concerned that residents have lost respect for the waterways that are the region's lifeblood.

The canals have a rich history in Phoenix, stretching to the Hohokam civilization that vanished about 500 years ago. Many of the canals still in use follow the paths of ancient irrigation ditches carved out by the Hohokam, which were later uncovered by White and Mexican settlers.

For decades, the canals were a community focal point, where residents gathered in the shade under tall cottonwood trees lining banks or splashed in the water to cool off during the hot summer months. Some even used the canals for water skiing.

By the late 20th century, though, that was largely gone. SRP had transformed meandering, earthen canals into utilitarian channels with steep banks. To save water, the canals were lined with concrete, and the shade trees that once grew alongside were cut down.

Diane Brossart, president of Arizona Forward, said improvements along the Grand Canal have the potential to encourage commercial or residential development on land adjacent to the canal bank that would treat the waterway like a front porch, not a back alley.

"Our 180-plus miles of canals in the Valley carry huge potential to become a larger part of our urban fabric as place-makers," she said. "It's not just talking about sustainable projects, it's actually doing them."