



Credit: Kate Gallego/Twitter.

Phoenix is the fifth-largest U.S. city and the fastest-growing metropolis in the country. For Mayor Kate Gallego—the second elected female mayor in Phoenix history and, at 39, the youngest big-city mayor in the United States—navigating that growth means prioritizing economic diversity, investments in infrastructure, and sustainability. As a member of the Phoenix City Council, Gallego led the campaign to pass a citywide transportation plan extending to 2050, the country's largest local government commitment to transportation infrastructure when it passed in 2015. Before entering politics, Gallego worked on economic development for the Salt River Project, a nonprofit water and energy utility that serves more than two million people in central Arizona. Shortly after being elected to a second term, Mayor Gallego spoke with Senior Fellow Anthony Flint, kicking off a series of 75th anniversary interviews with mayors of cities that are especially significant to the Lincoln Institute. An edited transcript of their conversation follows.

Sustainability and Urban Form in Phoenix

ANTHONY FLINT: Congratulations on your re-election. What issues do you think motivated voters most in these tumultuous times?

KATE GALLEGO: Voters were looking for candidates who would deliver real data-driven leadership and science-based decision making. I come to this job with a background in economic development and an undergraduate environmental degree. My chemistry professor told us that the more chemistry courses you take, the less likely you [are] to move up in electoral politics. But I think 2020 may have been a different year, when science mattered to voters . . . Arizona voters wanted leadership that would take COVID-19 seriously, as well as challenges such as climate change and economic recovery.

For younger voters in particular, climate change was a very important issue. I ran for office as our community faced the hottest summer on record. In some communities, climate change may be a future issue, but in Phoenix, it is an issue facing us right now. Different generations describe it differently. So my dad tells me, if you can just do something about the heat in the summer here, you'll definitely be reelected. A different lens, but I think the outcome is the same.

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AF: How has the pandemic affected your urban planning efforts? Did it surface any unexpected opportunities?

KG: The pandemic has really changed how people interact with their communities. We saw recreational biking and walking increase. What people tell us is they didn't realize how much they enjoyed that form of moving about the community, and they intend to keep some of those behavior changes. . . . We're currently looking at how we can create more public spaces. Can we expand outdoor dining and let people interact more with each other?

Dr. Anthony Fauci has told us that the more time we can spend outdoors, the better for fighting COVID-19. But that also has other great benefits. I serve as mayor of the city with the most acres of parks of any United States city, and this has been a record year for us enjoying those Phoenix parks. . . . You can be in the middle of Phoenix on a hiking trail, and some days you don't see anyone else. So those amenities and the focus of our planning around parks have really improved this year.

We also continue to invest in our transportation system. We've decided to speed up investment in transit, a decision that we did have real debate over, which I think will allow us to move toward a more urban form. We've actually seen increased demand for urban living in Phoenix. We have more cranes in our downtown than ever before, and we are regularly seeing applications for taller buildings than we have seen before. I understand there's a real national dialogue about whether everyone will want to be in a suburban setting, but the market is going in a different direction in our downtown right now.

COVID-19 has also made us look at some of the key challenges facing our community, such as affordable housing, the digital divide, and food security, and we've made significant investments in those areas as well.

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Phoenix is the fifth-largest and fastest-growing city in the United States. Credit: Alan Stark/Flickr CC BY 2.0.



AF: Many people may think of Phoenix as a place with abundant space for single-family homes, where a house with a small yard and driveway is relatively affordable. Yet the city has a big problem with homelessness. How did that happen?

KG: Phoenix competes for labor with cities such as San Francisco and San Diego and others that have much more expensive costs of housing than we do. But affordable housing has been a real challenge for our community. Phoenix has been the fastest-growing city in the country. Although we have seen pretty significant wage growth, it has not kept up with the huge increases in mortgage and rent costs that our community has faced. It's good that people are so excited about our city and want to be part of it, but it has been very difficult for our housing market.

The council just passed a plan on affordable housing that includes a goal to create or preserve 50,000 units in the next decade. We are looking at a variety of policy tools, and multi-family housing will have to be a big part of the solution if we are going to get the number of units that we need. So again, that may be moving us toward a more urban form of development.

AF: Opponents of the recent light rail expansion argued it would cost too much, but there also seemed to be some cultural backlash against urbanizing in that way. What was going on there?

KG: Our voters have voted time and time again to support our light rail system. The most recent time was a ballot proposition [to ban light rail] in 2019, shortly after I was elected. It failed in every single one of the council districts; it failed in the most Democratic precinct and the most Republican precinct in the city. Voters sent a strong message that they do want that more urban form of development and the opportunity that comes with the light rail system. We've seen significant investments in health-care assets and affordable housing along the light rail. We've also seen school districts that can put more money into classrooms and teacher salaries because they don't have to pay for busing a significant number of students. We have really been pleased with the impact of light rail on our city when we have businesses come to our community. They often ask for locations along light rail because they know it's an amenity that their employees appreciate. So I consider it a success, but I know we're going to keep talking about how and where we want to grow in Phoenix.

By providing an alternative to private cars, the Valley Metro light rail system reduces airborne emissions by as much as 12 tons per day. The transit line has spurred economic development and earned broad support from voters. Credit: Jasperdo/ Flickr CC BY 2.0.



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AF: We can’t talk about Phoenix and Arizona without talking about water. Where is the conversation currently in terms of innovation, technology, and conservation in the management of that resource?

KG: Speaking of our ambitious voters, they passed a plan for the City of Phoenix setting a goal to be the most sustainable desert city. Water conservation has been a value here and will continue to be. The city already reuses nearly all wastewater on crops, wetlands, and energy production. We’ve done strong programs in banking water, repurposing water, and efficiency and conservation, many of which have become models for other communities.

We are planning ahead. Many portions of our city are dependent on the Colorado River, and that river system faces drought and may have even larger challenges in the future. So we’re trying to plan ahead and invest in infrastructure to address that, but also look at our forest ecosystem and other solutions to make sure that we can continue to deliver water and keep climate change front of mind. We’ve also had good luck with green and sustainable bonds, which the city recently issued. It was time to invest in our infrastructure, and . . . partnerships with The Nature Conservancy and others have helped us look at how we manage water in a way that takes advantage of the natural ecosystem, whether stormwater filtration or how we design our pavement solutions. So we’ve had some neat innovation. We have many companies in this community that are at the forefront of water use, as you would expect from a desert city, and I hope Phoenix will be a leader in helping other communities address water challenges.

AF: Finally, if you’ll indulge us: our founder established the Lincoln Foundation in 1946 in Phoenix, where he was active in local philanthropy. Would you comment on the ways that the stories of Phoenix and the Lincolns and this organization are intertwined?

KG: Absolutely. The Lincoln family has made a huge impact on Phoenix and our economy. One of our fastest-growing areas in terms of job growth has been our health-care sector, and the Honor-Health network owes its heritage to John C. Lincoln. The John C. Lincoln Medical Center has been investing and helping us get through so many challenges, from COVID-19 to all the challenges facing a quickly growing city.

I want to recognize one family member in particular: Joan Lincoln, who was one of the first women to lead an Arizona city [as mayor of Paradise Valley, 1984 to 1986; Joan was the wife of longtime Lincoln Institute Chair David C. Lincoln and mother of current Chair Kathryn Lincoln]. When I decided to run for mayor, none of the 15 largest cities in the country had a female mayor; many significant cities, such as New York and Los Angeles, still have not had one. But in Arizona, I’m nothing unusual. I’m not the first [woman to serve as] Phoenix mayor and I’m one of many [female] mayors throughout the valley. That wasn’t true when Joan paved the way. She really was an amazing pioneer, and she has made it more possible for candidates like myself to not be anything unusual. I’m grateful for her leadership. □

Anthony Flint is a senior fellow at the Lincoln Institute and a contributing editor of *Land Lines*.

Listen to the full interview on the *Land Matters* podcast: www.lincolninst.edu/podcast/kate-gallego

Explore the *Making Sense of Place* film series to learn more about Phoenix: <http://msop.lincolninst.edu/city/phoenix>