

The West Side suffers from what might politely be called an image problem Long dismissed by snobby East Siders as the province of Sun City seniors, gang members, gun-toting rednecks, and dudes with an affinity for primer-gray pick-ups, the West Side has languished in the Valley's collective consciousness mostly as a streak of unpleasantness to be endured on the drive to L.A.

Some have even claimed it is the perfect embodiment of Gertrude Stein's famous statement about Oakland, California: "There is no 'there' there."

The mockers had better think again, though, because the Valley's perennial underdog is playing host to Arizona's next big growth spurt, and the real-estate rush is already on.

In some areas of the West Valley, the price of land has doubled over the last year and a half, according to Don Bennett, a real estate broker and developer who has worked on the West Side since 1968. Even the latest estimates from the Maricopa Association of Governments (MAG) indicate that more people are expected to live west of the I-17 in 2030 than currently live in all of Maricopa County.

The reason for the real estate boom is simple, the population of Metro Phoenix is exploding, and the West Side is the last wide open place left for new growth to go.

"It's our turn," says Diane McCarthy, the unofficial "Godmother of the West Valley" and executive director of the Western Maricopa Coalition (WESTMARC), an organization that promotes growth in western Maricopa County.

A recent study by Arizona State University researchers predicts that the Valley could be home to nearly 10 million people by 2050 – and that's the lowest number they come up with. Under different scenarios, the population could swell to more than 17 million or even 28 million. *The study, called the Greater Phoenix Regional Atlas: a Preview of the Region's 50-Year Future*, says it's almost certain that Metro Phoenix will eat up all 4,600 square miles of land still available for development in Maricopa County and take big bites of neighboring Pinal and Yavapai counties, too. That's roughly the size of Yosemite and Yellowstone National Parks combined.

All those new people have to live and work somewhere, and McCarthy points to the fact that Scottsdale, Chandler, North Phoenix, and the other East Side boom towns of the 1990s have pushed all the way to the government and tribal lands at their borders and don't have any big tracts of open land left.

And big tracts of open land are exactly what developers want. Douglas Ranch, a 35,000-acre master-planned community, was recently given the thumbs up by voters in Buckeye. The largest master-planned community in Arizona history, it could eventually house as many as 300,000 people. And it's not the only big project in the works. Almost all the plans for residential development on the West Side covers 2,000, 4,000, and 10,000 or more acres.

Already, small-and medium-size like Surprise, Goodyear, and Avondale are planning whole new downtowns – complete with new city halls, community centers, retail and office space, and, at least in Surprise, a new aquatic center – to cope with the massive influx of people who will need shops, jobs, government services, and something to do after work.

Goodyear is also getting a new 74-bed community hospital at the corner of McDowell and Dysart roads and a new regional mall near McDowell Road and Bullard Avenue, while Avondale is soon to be home to the largest parish church in the state, St. Thomas Aquinas Catholic Church. The 1,600-seat, 48,000-square foot behemoth is already under construction at Litchfield and Thomas roads. It's scheduled to open in October with a K-8 school, parish offices, and a 25-foot-high, 50,000-pound dome over the sanctuary.

Even Maryvale is getting a shot of redevelopment in the form of a new library and community center designed by Wendell Burnette, a Phoenix-based architect who helped design the city's Burton Barr Central Library. The project broke ground in July, but it's special for more than its architectural innovation.

Maryvale – all 7,000 acres of it – is one of the first two master planned communities built anywhere in the country. When it started going up in 1954 – the same time as New York's Levittown on Long Island – it revolutionized the housing industry.

Planners hope the new Maryvale community Center/Palo Verde Library will help revitalize Arizona's first master-planned community. The Glendale Arena rises from the middle of a field near 91st Avenue and Glendale



“It was really the first time that (a developer thought of) owning all the land, putting in all the schools, putting in all the business districts, and the homes all laid out on a scale like that,” says Nancy Dallet, and ASU public historian who worked on the project with Burnette.

Maryvale, which stretches across Phoenix’s West Side from 39th to 83rd avenues and McDowell Road to Maryland Avenue, was so big and so revolutionary that its developer, Arizona legend John E. Long, had to come up with a new way of building. He treated the whole process like an assembly line, but instead of running the house down the line like on a conveyor belt, Long had gangs of specialized workers move up and down the streets. The process got so efficient that at its peak, there were 20 houses a day gong up in Maryvale, and the post-war housing boom meant they sold just as quickly.

Nearly 50 years later, parts of Maryvale are deteriorated and crime ridden, but Burnette hopes “all that new investment [in the library and community center] will make people feel better about their community.” He also points to Long as a model for other developers, saying he has stayed involved in the community he built, even helping arrange funding for this project.

Perhaps the most visible sign of the changes coming to the West Side today, though, are the new sports complexes going up in Glendale. All 10 stories and 610,000 square feet of the Glendale Arena are rising (and sinking – the arena floor is 30 feet below ground) from what used to be a farmer’s field near 91st and Glendale avenues. The Coyotes are scheduled to play their first game there December 27, but the arena itself is only the first step in the transformation of the area, according to Brian Byrnes, executive vice president for business operations at the Phoenix Coyotes Hockey Club.

He says Westgate, the development centered around the arena, will bring more than 800 lofts and apartments, 3 million square feet of retail and office space, a movie theater, and a 1,100-room hotel to the square mile surrounding the arena. The whole area will have a pedestrian-friendly design similar to Scottsdale’s Kierland Commons, but Byrnes says it will be five times bigger.

“Ten years from now, you’ll look at this and marvel how we built an arena in the middle of a city,” he says.

Further south, workers haven’t broken ground yet on the new Arizona Cardinals football stadium, but that hasn’t stopped Glendale from becoming a contender to host the 2008 Super Bowl. It may be a long shot, but the fact that National Football League team owners will pick between Glendale; Tampa, Florida; Washington, D.C.; and New York City this October gives an indication of the sheer scale of development in what was once considered the Valley’s ugly stepchild.

Other huge developments are aiming to change the character as well as the demographics of the West Side.

Verrado, an 8,800-acre, master-planned community currently under construction just north of the I-10 in Buckeye, mimics the plan of a small town. It features a pedestrian-friendly design unusual for master-planned communities anywhere – let alone in car-crazy Arizona – but J.T. Elbracht, a Taliesin West-trained architect and the director of community design at Verrado, says he wants the place to be different from the Taco Bell-inspired subdivisions found elsewhere in the state.

“We didn’t want it to be those same lifeless, faceless collections of houses that all look alike,” he says, so he skipped the cul-de-sacs and security gates found in other new subdivisions in favor of a pedestrian-friendly Main Street anchored on either end by the community center and golf clubhouse and filled with shops, offices, and walk-up apartments. Surrounding the town center will be rings of walkable, park-filled neighborhoods that get less and less dense until they change to custom-home lots in the foothills of the White Tank Mountains.

Further north, the people planning Festival Ranch have a different, but equally aesthetic, concern. The 10,000-acre development west of the White Tanks could eventually house 70,000 people over the next 30 years, but Dick Frye, the vice president of development at Scottsdale-based Lyle Anderson Company, says the desert isn’t exactly picturesque out there. His word for it is “bleak,” so the goal at Festival Ranch is to dress it up using only native and desert-adapted vegetation that won’t kick out mass quantities of pollen or ruin the desert environment.

Housing is taking a back seat to commercial growth in Glendale, though. The city is the third largest in the Valley and fourth largest in the state, but it has little room left for new developments. City officials are instead focusing on transforming the fields and feed lots along the western stretch of the Loop 101 into a gigantic employment corridor. Julie Frisoni, Glendale’s communications director, says huge residential developments are “not really our thing right now,” and that the city’s latest plans call for enough retail, commercial, and

industrial space along the freeway to provide 15,000 new jobs, making Glendale the employment hub of the West Side.

This also could bring big bucks to the city – already home to the state’s wealthiest zip code in Arrowhead Ranch – and good things for commercial developers in the area, too.

David Scholl, senior vice president of the Valley’s biggest mall developer, Westcor, says the number of affluent customers at Arrowhead Towne Center has gone through the roof since it opened 10 years ago. Now, he and other Westcor executives are planning a major renovation that will attract upscale boutiques and specialty stores to the West Side for the first time.

Few commercial projects match the ambition found in a couple of non-profit groups’ plans to improve the quality of life on the West Side, though.

One of the biggest is the West Valley Recreation Corridor, a necklace of parks and recreation areas that could eventually stretch more than 40 miles from New River in North Phoenix to the southern reaches of the Agua Fria River in Goodyear and Avondale.

“It’s basically a large-scale Indian Bend Wash,” says Diane Brossart, the president of Valley Forward, a 34-year-old organization dedicated to bringing together public-and private-sector leaders to improve the quality of life in Metro Phoenix. “It could be a real identifying factor for the Valley.”

Don’t hold your breath waiting for all those hiking, equestrian, and mountain-biking trails, though. Brossart says the corridor will likely come to life a bit at a time over the next 40 years.

Marcie Ellis takes an equality long view when it comes to supporting arts and culture on the West Side. The executive director of the West Valley Fine Arts Council, Ellis spends most of her time coordinating the various arts groups in the area and trying to find money to help them grow. She doesn’t see this as charity, though; she sees it as economic development.

“Communities that don’t develop their community infrastructure are places where people leave once they get enough money,” Ellis says. “I’d like the West Valley to stay the kind of place where young couples can afford starter homes, but I’d like to help make it a place where they can be stimulated culturally, too. That way, they won’t have to move to Scottsdale in a couple years.” – M

Developers are planning to build a small city complete with commercial, retail, and residential space (below) around the Phoenix Coyotes’ new home at the Glendale Arena.

