

## **West Valley's Buckeye poised for growth boom**

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Eric Anderson circles the seventh tee at the new Sundance Golf Course, which is far more than just Buckeye's first set of links.

The rolling fairways are harbingers of a growth explosion that is pushing metro Phoenix beyond the White Tank Mountains, long seen as the geographic western boundary of "the Valley."

"We've been invested here for 20 years," Anderson says before two-putting into the cup. "We've been waiting for this town to go."

He and his wife, Penny, are among the first residents of the percolating Sundance housing community, which, at a mere 2,000 acres and just one golf course, is among the smallest of Buckeye's planned developments.

Some projections show the town's population ballooning to as high as 149,000 by 2020.

The Andersons are also models of Buckeye's prototype new resident: They live in Buckeye, work in Buckeye and now play golf in Buckeye.

Those are big keys for a town planning area that is second only to Phoenix in size, and voters this month will decide the fate of a single housing project larger than Tempe.

The growth projections are almost unfathomable in Buckeye, where one of the biggest recent issues was the re-stripping of traffic lanes on Monroe Street. One of the biggest recent downtown business openings was a dollar store.

### **Change is in the air**

But those times are changing rapidly on the western edge of the Valley, where land west of the White Tanks has become hot property. The appearance of the Sundance development, which is built at the equivalent of 235<sup>th</sup> Avenue south of Interstate 10, is only the beginning. And with homes starting at just \$90,000, they're seen as an affordable investment almost guaranteed to grow along with the population.

"What a lonely place the West Valley was back in 1992," said Greg Vogel of Arizona Land Advisors, a Phoenix-based land brokerage. "Now it's the most popular place."

Buckeye has managed to annex much of the land just west of the White Tanks in an effort to consolidate control of the Hassayampa River aquifer. The town's plans are ambitious but only part of the far West Valley growth equation.

- Goodyear is continuing to grow rapidly on land leading up to Buckeye, and the continued development of Estrella Mountain Ranch eventually will push the metropolitan area across 20,000 acres around the south side of the Sierra Estrella Mountains.
- Residents in Tonopah, on the west side of Buckeye, have begun talking about incorporating as Arizona's newest city, in part to avoid being overtaken by Buckeye's growth.
- Large amount of Maricopa County land are also in the offing, including an as-yet-unplanned development down as Belmont that approaches Douglas Ranch in size.

Critics question the availability of water, the sparse transportation system and Buckeye's ability to handle the growth.

Developers and real estate experts counter that the magic of master-planned communities, the wealth of the Hassayampa River aquifer and the long-range build-out of the area will easily solve those problems.

### **Can't stop growth**

"Growth is happening. You can't prevent it or stop it," said Mel Schultz, one of the partners in the 35,000-acre Douglas Ranch project, which needs Buckeye voters' approval May 20. "At the end of the day, Douglas Ranch will be developed. It'll either be in the county or in Buckeye."

The Douglas Ranch election could be a landmark decision for the town. If the 55-square-mile project is shot down, officials said it could prompt developers to avoid annexation and build projects under Maricopa County planning standards, which are generally considered looser than cities'. And when those developments include thousands of acres at a time, that's crucial distinction.

"We want to see that this is not just a victory, but a big victory by a large margin," Schultz said. "That sends a message to the development community. If this is a close call, it'll send a negative message."

Longtime Valley zoning attorney Steve Earl, who represents the Douglas Ranch developers, said the proliferation of large master-planned communities west of the White Tanks is a major boon for the area. It prevents a mishmash of smaller developments that might not work together and won't coordinate roads, water or sewer systems.

"I've been in the zoning business for 25 years," Earl said. "I don't know a city in the Valley that has this kind of unprecedented opportunity for master-planning."

He noted that master-planning provided for a mix of housing, retail shops, employment and entertainment centers with the intent of reducing commuter traffic so people can live, work and play in the same area.

"So much of what's happened in the Valley that people are dissatisfied with, master-planned communities can take care of," said Drew Smith, marketing director for Verrado, the DMB

development that will open this fall on the eastern face of the White Tanks. “It’s blending in uses, rather than haphazard subdivisions.”

### **Avoid Freeways**

Although houses always precede retail and commercial developments, sometimes by a number of years, the theory behind the master-planned community is to keep people off the freeways.

Interstate 10 has only two lanes in each direction west of Goodyear. The Sun Valley Parkway, which wraps around the White Tanks, also has just two lanes each way and dumps traffic onto congested Bell Road in Surprise and Sun City.

Buckeye’s development agreements, however, require the various builders to pay for all of the infrastructure, including roads, involved in a project. Douglas Ranch, for instance, plans to build a bridge over the Hassayampa River to get cars in and out of its project.

“Roads, waterways, washes, all those things are provided for under the master plan,” Buckeye Town Councilman Jackie Meck said. “They’re providing fire and police within the master-planned community. They’re working with the town in providing those. The taxpayers are not having to pay (for) any of the infrastructure. The developers themselves, they’re putting the money up front and building the facilities and turning them over to the city.”

Schultz noted that the developers will pay for the operation and a maintenance of streets until the project generated enough tax revenue to cover the costs for the town. Developers also must help pay the costs of additional freeway interchanges, as both Verrado and Sundance did for their off-ramps.

Vogel noted that development of Loop 303 on the east side of the White Tanks could help ease traffic throughout the West Valley. Expansion of Arizona 85, which stretches between Buckeye and Phoenix several miles south of Interstate 10 could also become a major traffic reliever.

“There’s going to be a lot of work that needs to be done,” Vogel said. “But all this growth doesn’t happen in one day.”

State and county transportation officials said widening I-10 will be a high priority as growth marches west. That will make a proposed half-cent transportation sales tax extension a major issue next year. Some southwest Valley officials have said the road could be 10 lanes wide and still be over crowded when cities such as Avondale and Goodyear near build-out.

No major transportation study has been undertaken for the area west of the White Tank Mountains. The Maricopa Association of Governments is in the midst of a study of the southwest Valley from the eastern edge of Buckeye along I-10 and into Phoenix.

Most of the major developments west of the mountains likely won’t reach build-out for several decades. And town officials and builders note that not a single house can be built until the state is convinced that the area has enough water to handle the growth.

### **Water supply is Key**

“For every subdivision... we have to go to (the State Department of Water Resources) and demonstrate to them... there is a 100-year water supply,” said David Eaton, another partner in Douglas Ranch. “So if there’s a water problem, it’s our risk. They won’t approve it.”

Doug Dunham, manager of the state Department of Water Resources’ Office of Assured and Adequate Water Supply, said the agency has not done a recent study of the Hassayampa aquifer. But he said the agency does go to great detail in ensuring that new developments will have adequate water before they are allowed to build.

“We do a very detailed review, down to a lot-by-lot basis, parks, landscaping, plans for landscaping along roadways and making sure all the schools are accounted for,” Dunham said.

Concern over the area’s water supply was such a major issue when Douglas Ranch was proposed that the Toyota Motor Co., which owns a proving ground just north of the project, funded the referendum to force this month’s election on the development.

After months of negotiations, however, Toyota withdrew its opposition. Key to the reversal is the developers’ decision to build a massive groundwater recharge station on 200 acres of land it plans to donate.

Earl said the Hassayampa aquifer is the largest untapped water resource in Arizona.

Meck added that without assurances that the aquifer could handle not only the Douglas Ranch project, but Festival Ranch, Sun Valley, Tartesso and other communities, the town never would have endorsed the projects.

### **Main Street Feel**

Several dozen homes have been sold in Sundance, which includes a retirement community, recreation center and golf clubhouse. Verrado, with its “Main Street U.S.A.” theme, is expected to open model homes this fall. Preliminary development work has begun on Festival Ranch and Tartesso.

The winds of change are definitely causing headaches for residents such as Mary Anderson, who speaks reverently of the small-town atmosphere in downtown Buckeye cafes like Darla’s Country Kitchen.

“You go into Darla’s and it’s just like what Buckeye should be,” said Anderson, 53, a three-year resident. “Everybody knows everybody more or less. It’s a little-town café. I grew up with that.

“But it’s going to be gone. It’s going to go away.”

Town officials say they want to maintain that feel, and the new master-planned communities are far enough north to prevent major impacts in Old Town. And for those who roll their eyes at the notion of major development in far-off Buckeye, Meck offers a simple reminder:

“In the mid-1960s we would go up (by Sun City) and have breakfast or coffee, and that’s when Del Webb started,” Meck said. “We were amazed any builder would build out there. You were out in the middle of nowhere. Nobody could really understand why people would buy a home all the way out there. Now look at Sun City.”