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'06 memorable in Surprise

The Republic
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2006 was a momentous year for Surprise and the Northwest Valley, bringing unprecedented growth that saw Surprise hit the 100,000-population mark at midyear. Shortly thereafter, it topped *Money* magazine's list of U.S. cities with the highest job-growth rates, thanks to the rapid influx of businesses and development. City government alone accounted for many new jobs it expanded to meet new demands.

Three new schools opened in Dysart Unified School District, whose growing pains still mean shifting attendance boundaries. The good news is voters in November approved a \$190 million bond to help the district handle growth.

City Hall was busy with projects to continue Surprise Center's transformation. A new court facility opened in the spring. The Heard Museum West arrived in June. More new facilities in the same general area started planning and/or construction this year:

- A new, \$53 million City Hall and two new fire stations, including the \$2.2 million Station 301.
- DreamCatcher Park, a recreational complex to meet the needs of special-needs residents; a 25-court tennis center; a youth baseball park, and other recreation projects.
- A Holiday Inn Express and Suites in Surprise Stadium Village.

Technology was high on the city's priority list, as well, with initiatives launched to deliver wireless Internet connectivity and broadband over power lines to parts of the city, putting it in the vanguard of 21st-century cities. The city also is exploring ways to create a biotechnology village in its core that would attract research firms. Already, Sun Health Research Institute of Sun City is considering locating there.

Several programs were approved to revitalize the city's original town site, along with new developments like Prasada along the Loop 303 corridor.

Road improvements have a way to go, but Bell Road saw important upgrades this year, particularly with turn lanes added at the Sun City West entrance. Likewise, the Northwest Valley benefited from the rebirth of the Sundome as the Maricopa County Events Center, a newly-busy venue that hosted such luminaries as Bob Dylan and James Brown.

There were troubling headlines, too.

A rift between Surprise Mayor Joan Shafer and Councilman Gary "Doc" Sullivan has led an Attorney General's probe of Shafer's allegations that her rival politically threatened her. Farther north, Wittmann residents loudly protested efforts by Surprise to oversee land-use planning for their rural community. And in Youngtown, the firing of the town manager earlier this year led to the November recall of Mayor Bryan Hackbarth and two council members.

Crime news was mercifully sporadic, though an August carjacking spree led authorities on a violent chase through Surprise and Sun City that ended in a Las Vegas shootout a few days later.

Other public-safety stories included collapse of the Sundial Recreation Center roof in Sun City at midyear; a fire that killed a longtime Surprise resident in November; and a horrific crash in November on Grand Avenue near 104th Avenue that killed three people and injured several others.

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