

Changing face

In coming years, Marana will see construction of at least three high-end resorts

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The face of Marana has been changing for a while.

Once a haven for ranchers and farmers, the 120-square-mile town has become home to young professionals and suburban families, as well as high-brow folks looking for a pristine spot to put their million-dollar homes.

The latter crowd has found a home in the foothills of the Tortolita Mountains, where custom homes continue to go up in luxury developments like Saguaro Ranch. Nearby Dove Mountain received national coverage recently when Tiger Woods and 63 other top golfers made their first appearance at The Gallery Golf Club for the PGA's Accenture Match Play Championship.

Marana will host the tournament through 2009. Dove Mountain developer David Mehl and town officials would like the PGA to stay longer. Mehl has another golf course in the works, designed in conjunction with golfing legend Jack Nicklaus and the PGA.

In addition, the PGA might find the resorts on Marana's drawing board more than ample reason to stick with the town. In the coming years, the town will have three resort hotels within a span of about 2 miles.

"The Tortolita foothills is attracting many uses, including residential and commercial," Mehl said. "It also seems to be attracting resorts."

The town planned to have at least two of the resorts built in time for the PGA's first appearance. Instead, folks who might have stayed in Marana spent their overnight dollars in Tucson.

"We're really looking forward (to the resorts)," Councilman Herb Kai said. "Instead of sending people to Starr Pass, we can put them up in Marana."

Saguaro Ranch a few months ago broke ground on a guest ranch that will include a 10,000-square-foot spa, "fresco dining areas" and a meditation lawn — not necessarily a weathered farmer's cup of tea.

The artisan-inspired resort probably will attract more worldly travelers with money to spend — another plus to the resorts, according to town officials.

Just to the west of Saguaro Ranch, Dove Mountain has the monster coming with one of the largest Ritz-Carlton Hotels in the world. Mehl and his company Cottonwood Properties have yet to finalize a deal with the Ritz, but the hotel likely would be jointly owned between the two companies.

The planned four-story Ritz would have 250 rooms, as well as several casitas, or guest houses, with full hotel service. The town council last September approved the Ritz-Carlton development plan, which also includes a pool and bar.

Officials have made it clear that they intend to move forward with the Ritz as if it were a done deal.

In between Dove Mountain and Saguaro Ranch, Town West Realty has plans for another high-end residential development with 55 acres zoned for another resort.

The Marana town council recently adopted the Foothills specific plan, which calls for almost 1,500 residential units and a mix of commercial and hotel uses. Town West has begun talking to a couple companies, but nothing is set in stone.

“We’re looking to do hotels, spas, condos, casitas,” said Town West President Jim Horvath. “And the residents in that area will be able to receive hotel services.”

With the resorts and thousands of residential lots planned for the town, Marana will struggle to hold onto its agricultural roots. Many farmers and ranchers no longer own their land, but lease it from developers.

“You don’t stay a little cotton town forever,” said Kai, whose family has made millions of dollars farming in Marana.

“Agriculture doesn’t pay a lot of bills,” said Joe Parsons, whose family cattle operation has 300 acres in northern Marana and hundreds more in Pinal and Pima counties.

“This kind of development is coming. We’ve withstood it as long as we could. People won’t be doing what I’m doing 25 to 30 years from now in Marana.”

While agriculture will dwindle, it will not disappear altogether, Assistant Town Manager Jim DeGrood said. The town still has hundreds of acres along the Santa Cruz River in the 100-year flood plain, on which houses cannot be built.

“The Santa Cruz River, I think, will ensure that there is perpetual agriculture in the region,” DeGrood said.

On the other hand, the resorts and associated development will provide the town with a tourism industry that it really never had. Town officials cite Marana’s proximity to several environmental tourist spots, including Ironwood Forest National Monument and Saguaro National Park.

“We’re winged by substantial environmental resources that people would enjoy visiting,” DeGrood said.

In addition, the town’s planned Heritage Park along the Santa Cruz River will attract history buffs who want to learn about Marana before the houses and resorts, officials said.

Upscale hotels and amenities mean an across-the-board boost to other town projects, including the town’s regional airport, Town Manager Mike Reuwsaat said. Increased airport traffic also could help the town along in its joint planning with the state for the land surrounding the airport.

The golf tournament always will draw people. The resorts will keep them in Marana so they can spend their money in town, officials said, adding that Marana’s resorts will benefit the entire region.

In fact, Marana’s planned resorts lead right into a new Oro Valley resort that begins construction in September. Vistoso Resort and Spa in Rancho Vistoso will feature a 440-room condominium hotel, spa and rooftop bar overlooking the Catalina Mountains.

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