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# Developments rising in shadow of reactors

*Thousands moving in within a 10-mile radius*

**Mark Shaffer**

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WINTERSBURG - When Arizona Public Service Co. was looking for a site way out by its lonesome 30 years ago to build the nation's largest nuclear power plant, this remote area of desert scrub was the perfect fit.

Just ask Doris Heisler, one of the nearby community of Tonopah's pioneers when she bought 100 acres near Interstate 10 and moved there in 1974.

"I'll never forget looking in all directions at night from outside my house and counting seven lights," Heisler said.

But a housing boom not much farther away than the shadows of Palo Verde's three reactor domes appears to be in the offing. It is expected to attract thousands of homeowners within the plant's 10-mile emergency notification zone during the next two decades.

Development plans have been filed with Maricopa County for eight master-planned communities, most of which are north and northeast of Palo Verde, where the prevailing winds are from the southwest to the northeast. Preliminary plans call for more than 107,000 dwellings to be built on 33,000 acres.

The Saddle Mountain Unified School District has built a large administrative center seven miles north of the plant in anticipation of thousands of children attending schools spaced throughout the Tonopah area.

## Speculation continues

Even with the housing slowdown in the Valley, speculation has continued to drive up prices around Tonopah, which has yet to incorporate. An estimated 7,000 people now live within 10 miles of Palo Verde, double the number in 2002.

The price of an acre has more than tripled to almost \$60,000 an acre between I-10

and the nuclear power plant during the past three years, local real estate agents said.

Jim Levine, Palo Verde's plant manager, said he is powerless to do anything about development on nearby private land. Palo Verde is situated on 4,000 acres owned by APS and other utilities.

"There's nothing wrong with encroachment by itself," he said. "But it does impact our emergency planning and how many people we would have to notify in the case of an emergency."

Developers of subdivisions within 10 miles of Palo Verde must provide emergency horns within their subdivisions and signs indicating routes of quick access in the event of an evacuation. The annual testing of the horns will be conducted today, APS officials said.

Palo Verde officials wouldn't have to notify another huge, planned subdivision to the east in the event of an emergency because it is 15 miles away.

But that development, 30,000 dwellings on the western side of the White Tanks bordering Sun Valley Parkway, also could present problems if a rapid evacuation were mandated, resulting in clogged roads, primarily I-10. The master-planned community would be northeast of Palo Verde in the Belmont area.

## **Growth predicted**

Brian Rosella, a land developer for Grubb & Ellis-BRE Commercial of Phoenix, which has invested in the Tonopah area, said a builder already is in place for Belmont to develop 4,000 acres between 339th and 363rd avenues.

Rosella also said that the developer of the 960-acre Desert Whisper area, even farther to the west between 363rd and 371st avenues, is "very anxious to get moving."

"Like everywhere in this region, that area slowed a bit recently, but we are expecting it to really pick up during the next six to nine months," he said.

That's because home prices are expected to be considerably cheaper than in subdivisions to the east.

Jack Arend, president of the Tonopah Valley Community Council, said growth will be guided by which of the subdivisions goes in first.

"They are all running about neck and neck now," Arend said. "The thing that looks most certain now is that 28 acres of commercial land south of the school district building will become a strip mall with a supermarket, clothing stores and maybe a small Wal-Mart. That's an essential since the closest shopping now is 22, 23 miles away in the West Valley."

Howard Weinstein, a principal at Scottsdale-based Weinstein and Harris, added, "The proximity of Palo Verde is a concern, and it will be bad enough for a buyer if

they can't see the tops of the towers to read about them in the public disclosure. But the truth is that price will overcome everything else, and that's where the best value is going to be."

The company has invested in the area.

## **Locals are content**

That's why Dave Schaut bought a 1,600-square-foot double-wide mobile home only two miles north of Palo Verde three years ago for \$82,000.

Schaut acknowledged he was dog tired one recent afternoon after the 40-mile, one-way drive from his job at a West Valley auto-parts store. But he chirped up after taking in the view from his front yard.

The late-afternoon sun setting behind desert mountains cast a soft, orange glow over Palo Verde's domes.

"Pretty sight, isn't it?" said Schaut, with no hint of fear of being so close to the nuclear station. "It doesn't bother me at all. If it goes, it's going to take out a lot more than just Tonopah; we'd just be the first to go."

Jerrie Mikus, staff developer for the Saddle Mountain School District, also said that the proximity of Palo Verde is seldom mentioned by area residents, although it was once was a dominant conversation topic years ago.

"Here, for the longest time, you couldn't even give away land in this area, and I think being so close to the nuke plant played a lot into that," Mikus said.

"But we've gone from busing many of our high school students on a dirt road to Wickenburg three years ago to having our own high school now with 310 kids in it. As more and more people come, they seem to think less and less about Palo Verde."

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