

Douglas Ranch planners get time to refine project

Kelly Carr

The Arizona Republic

Oct. 5, 2007 06:33 AM

The housing slump is giving planners more time to think through what will be Arizona's largest master-planned community.

Construction on Buckeye's Douglas Ranch was scheduled for next year, but now officials say they will wait until 2009 to begin building the mega-community.

That's partly because of a slowdown in the housing market, a shift now allows Douglas Ranch developers to make their community economically strong and culturally diverse.

Douglas Ranch, which encompasses more than 35,000 acres west of the White Tank Mountains - an area larger than Tempe - is expected to take 20 to 30 years to build. The community could include 100,000 homes and 55 million square feet of commercial retail space that could create 160,000 jobs.

There are roads to design and build through the desert. An economic core, which could boast a hospital and a university, must come alive on paper and there are community villages to finalize.

Tom Hennessy, general manager of Douglas Ranch, said about 100 people are assigned to the project. The consultants are trying to come up with innovative ways to make the community sustainable, evaluating alternative uses of energy, transportation options and water demand.

Hennessy, of El Dorado Holdings Inc., also is working out a partnership with Arizona State University that would have experts improving the Douglas Ranch concept.

"If we would have had to rush to market in 2008, I think we could have been ready with a plan, but we wouldn't have learned as much as we are learning now about things like solar energy and water use," he said. "We have top people working on this around the world and looking at best practices. We will know what is feasible and what makes sense in the next six months. If we had to rush to market, we may not have known that and there may have been more missteps along the way."

Mayor Bobby Bryant said he's impressed with Douglas Ranch's focus on the environment. He said the project's size makes the need to find innovative energy and water usages even more important.

"They are not coming in to build a few homes and leave. They want to invest in the community, not just make some quick cash," Bryant said. "I think that's why the group is looking at ways to help the environment. If you are here to stay, you care."

Planning a community that could function like a metropolitan area is a challenge.

Because Douglas Ranch will be one of the largest communities in the country, there are few precedents to help guide the architects and planners.

The project falls in one of the Valley's fastest-growing areas, a region west of the White Tank Mountains that could have more than 1 million people someday.

But for now, with huge swatches of barren land, Hennesey has to help people envision what the site may look and feel like. He tells them to think big.

"It's a big education process and you have to walk people through it," he said. "There is not a lot going on right now, so you really have to create a vision of what it will be in 20-30 years. It's hard for people to understand that.

"If you look at Austin, Texas, and what they have going on for them, with the University of Texas, Dell and their cultural community, it's a great city. It would be nice to have elements of that kind of city at Douglas Ranch."

Buckeye officials are in the second draft of a Douglas Ranch's master plan, which must be approved by the Town Council.