

Marana and Oro Valley growth

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The Northwest Side towns of Marana and Oro Valley had similar ideas in mind when each incorporated in the 1970s.

Both wanted to form their own boundaries to prevent fast-growing Tucson from ever coming up to grab them, and in doing so each hoped to create its own identity.

But those identities have changed over the years, as Marana no longer considers itself just a farm town and Oro Valley would rather not be viewed as just a haven for retirees.

And changing an image in the public eye isn't as simple as rewriting a slogan or putting together a flashy public relations campaign.

Marana and Oro Valley have each had to work long and hard to change how people perceive them, and they continue to do so today.

MARANA

The view from Interstate 10 hasn't changed much since Marana incorporated 30 years ago.

Cotton fields and untouched desert still line most of the freeway bisecting one of Arizona's fastest-growing towns, giving the impression Marana is still, for the most part, a sleepy farm community.

But further inside Marana's borders are large master-planned subdivisions, major retail centers, multi-million dollar homes, state-of-the-art municipal facilities and the site of a world-class sporting event.

The trick that town officials battle daily is getting "new" Marana to replace "old" Marana in people's memories.

"It's a pride thing," deputy town manager Gilbert Davidson said. "We want people to be proud that they live and have businesses in Marana."

Town is 120 square miles

For the record, Marana now covers about 120 square miles that spans as far south as Orange Grove Road and far east as Thornydale Road, with its most recent annexation moving the town's border over the Pima-Pinal County line.

More than 32,000 people live in the town, with most of them in three main population centers: Continental Ranch near I-10 and Cortaro Road, Dove Mountain at the base of the Tortolita Mountains and the original town land between I-10 and the Santa Cruz River.

Mayor Ed Honea calls his town a "progressive, inclusive community" that has some of the best attractions and amenities the Tucson area has to offer. He cited the WGC-Accenture Match Play Championship golf tournament and the planned Ritz-Carlton resort, both in Dove Mountain, as ways Marana is getting noticed.

"I think Marana is establishing itself as a leader in the region," Honea said. "The fact Accenture is using Marana instead of Tucson in their advertising is very big."

The Dove Mountain area also features Saguaro Ranch, where \$1.5 million homesites have gained regional and national attention.

But because Dove Mountain and all its other population and commercial centers are so far from each other, the town still battles an identity problem.

"People don't always know when they're in Marana," Davidson said. "We have a major challenge of connecting three different development areas and trying to make them as one."

Visual appeal is key

One way Marana has tried to rectify this is through town banners, which line most streetlights on major roads around Marana's retail corridor to the southeast and the Dove Mountain area.

The next step, officials say, is making what people see along I-10 much more appealing.

"I think, for people who don't live here, you pass through here on the freeway and see the cotton fields and the corn fields and think that's all there is to Marana," town spokesman Rodney Campbell said.

The town has been working with the Arizona Department of Transportation to ensure that any and all future freeway projects include landscaping and other beautification efforts.

Internally, Marana is considering putting an I-10 overlay zone into its general plan update that will dictate both the types of development that will eventually pop up along the freeway, as well as how those structures look.

"It's sort of like when you meet someone for the first time, you have 10 seconds to make that first impression," Davidson said. "When a visitor is driving on I-10 into Pima County driving into Marana, we want to make sure to put our best foot forward."

Town tries to keep its roots

While town officials try daily to accentuate the positives of their new structures, such as large-scale housing developments like Gladden Farms or the \$18.5 million Marana Municipal Complex that opened February 2005, an effort to keep a connection with Marana's roots is ongoing.

The town's slogan, "Committed To the Future ... Inspired By Our Past," is indicative of how Marana wants to stay true to its heritage, officials say.

"We want to have respectful remembrance of our history and where we came from," Honea said. "We want to maintain that farming history forever. We don't want to lose that."

The town is building a Heritage Park along the Santa Cruz River, a complex that includes a recently opened community farm.

"I think the Heritage Park is going to be a great showcase area to capitalize on Marana's past," Davidson said.

ORO VALLEY

"Home of the Speed Trap," "'Caddyshack' of the Region" — such slogans, which were used to describe Oro Valley in the past, no longer apply, according to Mayor Paul Loomis.

"Our residents include a wide variety of backgrounds, so that it's now difficult to identify Oro Valley as 'the ritzy place' or any other elements. We have a very diverse community," he said.

Oro Valley's two public high schools, Ironwood Ridge and Canyon del Oro, have a combined enrollment of about 3,800 students. And anyone going to the Oro Valley Public Library around a story time will see bunches of young faces.

But some people still see Oro Valley as an upscale suburb for older people.

"We have grown way beyond that, but a lot of people don't recognize that," Loomis said.

One way the town has changed its image is by offering residents a wider range of things to do than before, officials say.

"We worked hard expanding our parks and recreation programs beyond golf courses," Loomis said.

Some new community amenities the town plans to provide include Steam Pump Ranch — a site the town wants to turn into a historical educational attraction — and Naranja Town Site, a proposed recreational area.

"The focus has changed from high growth to quality-of-life issues," Town Manager David Andrews said.

Oro Valley also has tried to shed its country club image by turning itself from a bedroom community — a place where people live but travel for work and entertainment — into a place, as officials often say, where people "live, work and play."

And the town is already past the point of being a bedroom community, Andrews said.

It's grown a lot commercially from the days when it had "one gas station at the Circle K and two grocery stores," Loomis said.

Residents can now live and shop within Oro Valley, and officials are looking to create more employment opportunities, particularly technological and biomedical jobs, Andrews said.

"Now that the rooftops are here, it's the retail. Then it's the campus park industrial," he said

But there are consequences of having shopping and other amenities close to home.

Overall, Oro Valley has "changed from an environmentally sensitive community into one that is more interested in convenience. I'm not saying that that's necessarily a bad thing, unless you are a strong

environmentalist," said Bill Adler, an Oro Valley resident who is on the town's Planning and Zoning Commission, a volunteer advisory group.

Residents "want things closer to them, and that reinforces the remaining tendency to increase commercialization," he said