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Mesa to annex Proving Ground, and its history

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For 54 years, General Motors assumed the role of good corporate neighbor to Mesa without ever becoming a resident of the city.

The two had an "informal agreement," one retired Mesa official said. The city provided police and fire protection, and GM stayed involved with the community through food drives and the United Way.

Both stuck to the bargain, but GM always had an ulterior motive.

"They were very concerned about security," said Wayne Balmer, who served as planning and zoning director during the proving grounds' golden days. "They didn't want anyone to see their test products, and as long as Williams Air Force Base was their neighbor, it was difficult for civilian airplanes to fly in the area and over their test track without clearance."

Their productive relationship with Mesa was based on the city's view of them as "a good corporate citizen," he said. "They were always involved in things to help the community such as the United Way and food drives."

It was widely assumed that the automotive giant's desert proving ground was in Mesa even though it is on a county island just east of the city.

Annexing to one of America's fastest-growing municipalities was not a priority for a company that went to great lengths to keep its experimental vehicles and futuristic prototypes out of public view.

With GM's sale in 2004 of 1,800 of 5,000 acres that make up the proving ground to Pacific Proving for \$45 million, all that changed.

The company is headed by William Levine, a billboard mogul, who has applied for annexation to the city and plans to turn his land into a mixed-used development, including industrial, office and residential.

The remaining acreage was purchased in December by DMB, which is known for high-end housing and commercial projects such as Verrado in Buckeye. DMB, which agreed to pay \$265 million for the property, will move soon to have it in the city limits.

Both say becoming a corporate citizen of Mesa is on the front burner.

The property is just east of Williams Gateway Airport. It also is within Mesa's municipal planning area, and the city for years has contemplated that it would eventually come into the city, Taylor said.

"That puts us on a path of working with Mesa and their desire that this area become an employment core for the region," she said.

It also represents a major shift in corporate philosophy about annexation.

"The relationship between us and the city was always good but there was no advantage to Mesa for us to be annexed," said Jack

Sellers, a retired GM official and longtime spokesman for the proving grounds. "The city has no property tax."