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Maricopa Top Stories

Volkswagen Proving Grounds changing gears

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4,000 home master-planned community in the future

Volkswagen Corporation representative Mike Withey spoke to City Council members last week regarding the change of zoning for the company's testing site to that of a Master-Planned Community.

In December of 1991, the Volkswagen Corporation paid \$50 million for 1,600 acres in Maricopa as a place to test prototype cars. It was remote, and no one was bothered by their presence.

The VW's proving grounds, located in northeast Maricopa next to Tortosa near Murphy and Farrell roads, is a source of noisy operations, dust, and bright lights on a 24 hour/7-day a week schedule. It has caused minimal friction between their company and new residents in the Tortosa development, but is thought to only grow in intensity with the more people that move into the area. And residents in encroaching subdivisions have only to look from their second

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story porches or rooftops to get a gander at the latest car prototypes, which is a severe rift in the company's initial security when the land was originally developed by VW.

And so, although the company has been in Maricopa for 15 years, the inevitable growth of the city is forcing them to look somewhere else. And what will become of the land once they've vacated?

A request went up against both the Planning and Zoning board and City Council on Wednesday, Dec. 27 to change the zoning from (E) Employment to (MPC) Master Planned Community and was approved. Kay Bigalow, representing Murphy Land Investors of Tortosa, and Mike Withey for the Volkswagen Corporation, both spoke in favor of the amendment to the city's General Plan. Despite the collective groan many people will vocalize, thinking, "Not more houses!", the VW Corporation, City Council members and P&Z Commissioners have a plan.

Volkswagen had commissioned a study through Elliott D. Pollack & Company to review the amount of employment land within the city. According to the study, Maricopa had dedicated 10 percent of its developable land to commercialization and employment in the General Plan (12,700 acres out of the 270 square miles that make up the city currently).

Volkswagen says that in comparison to other cities such as Phoenix, Mesa, Glendale, Scottsdale and Tempe, 10 percent is a considerable surplus, and would still be far above in acreage percentage-wise than those cities even without their 1,600-acre proving ground. Those cities are cited as only providing between 2.8 and 5.4 percent for commercial development. The VW Corporation has promised Council members that this master-planned community will likewise dedicate 10 percent of its land mass (about 160 acres) to office and employment space on top of residential, school, church and neighborhood facilities. Those 160 acres could offer almost 8,000 jobs if two-story office/retail buildings are built - whereas the proving grounds presently supplies Maricopa with only 125 jobs.

Other concerns that were addressed by the P & Z Board and City Council were those of commercial traffic running through residential areas should the proving grounds be kept as developable "commercial" acreage. Commercial areas can generate up to four times more traffic than residential zones, and other employment areas in Maricopa's General Plan are located near major arterial roads and highways such as I-8, SR 84 and SR 347, the airport, or the Casa Grande-Maricopa Highway. The Volkswagen property has no such criteria for transportation access available to it, as well as being located so closely to the Gila River Indian community.

"I am in favor in the project," P & Z Commissioner Marquisha Griffin said. "I think it's something that Maricopa needs, I think it will be unique to Maricopa, it's the first, its kind in Maricopa. So I'm proud of that. But I just want to know that we're being proactive and that we're looking at the bigger picture and that we're looking at those things that may seem small, but in the grand scheme of things, will become a problem on top of the problems we already have."

City staff members assured the Commission that having those jobs within the master-planned community would cut down on traffic.

"Those people don't have to drive," Councilmember Kelly Haddad revisited that concern in the subsequent Council meeting. "I think it does a pretty darn good job of solving the transportation issue on its own. I like that."

Due to the residential areas being in proximity to the zone in question, several City Council members did vocalize their proclivity later that evening for office spaces being built within this Master Planned Community rather than retaining industrial areas.

"Do we want our kids to learn to drive forklifts, or run companies and work in computers, or biotech?" Councilmember Will Dunn asked. "I personally can drive a forklift, I've done it a lot. Don't want my kids to have to do that."

Mayor Kelly Anderson also agreed, saying, "I want my kids to operate computers versus a forklift, because I've been driving a tractor all of my life. And they need to keep their hands clean."

Dunn also said that he hoped that more projects came to the Council wrapped in the kind of packaging and promises that the VW proposal has come up with, to relieve employment concerns and traffic.

"Ten years from now, nobody's going to ask us, 'Why don't we have more homes?' They're going to ask us, 'Why don't we have more jobs?'" Dunn said.

One concern councilmember Edward Farrell raised was that Maricopa was starting to look too manufactured in its development and home designs. "With no disrespect to the other developments that exist in the city, the city is getting to be too much of a cookie-cutter city with your typical track homes," he said. "We've expressed our desire and need and diversity when it comes to residential housing. And that's the specific reason that Volkswagen took us on a tour of these Valley master-planned communities....but how are we rest assured that we're going to get that type of development in Maricopa in the near future?"

"To get those kind of high-end master-planned communities, you need the high-end jobs. Are we putting the cart before the horse, so to speak, by talking about these communities, or are we going to sit here and pass this tonight, and in another year end up with a master planned community that's just going to put up cookie cutter track homes?"

Mayor Anderson assured Farrell that the design later on would reflect the plans and desires expressed that night, as they were largely well-documented for public record for when the community plan comes back to the zoning board a few years from now. Haddad also requested that when the time comes when they later meet with the P & Z board once again before construction that the school district be consulted as to what sites they need at the time, preferably a high school. The amendment was unanimously approved, 7-0.

The VW proving grounds will be remain in Maricopa for another two to three years before selling the land to developers.

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