

Benson to benefit from Houghton Rd. corridor growth

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With major retail developers eyeing the southeast edge of Pima County, local officials say they will only help Benson's future.

The Arizona State Land Department recently announced a project they have been working on with Phoenix mall developer Westcor to create a master plan for 12,000 acres of land on what is called the Houghton Road Corridor.

Developing the entire parcel, which Tucson city officials say will amount to a second city, will take up to 30 years, but retail growth in Vail is planned even sooner.

Developer Bob Hoffman is building a 300-acre resort along Interstate 10 in Vail called the Passages of Tucson that that will include shopping, restaurants and a health and wellness village.

Hoffman, the attorney for the Mall of Americas project in Minnesota, said while they are not building a major mall, he is excited about Passages, which will start construction in early 2009.

Jim Miller, Passages of Tucson director of development, said Westcor's willingness to invest the time and resources needed to plan the 12,000 acres validates what they have been saying for some time.

"The southeast corridor will be the area for growth over the next 20 years," he said. "Neither party would be putting that much effort toward this area unless they wanted to be prepared to take advantage of that fact."

And as growth moves east, Benson officials are ready to take advantage. Referring to Benson as a satellite community, City Manager Martin Roush said they are definitely watching the commercial growth in Tucson.

"We are less than 45 minutes from Tucson, which is a major city," he said. "They have recently hit the one-million population mark, and that puts Benson on the national radar. We are going to benefit from people wanting to live near a large city, and from their shopping and enjoying Benson."

While it will be some time before Benson sees that kind of retail development, Roush said the more that becomes available in east Tucson, the more the local population will grow.

Agreeing with Roush is George Scott, executive director of the Southeast Arizona Economic Development Group (SAEDG).

Scott said as they continue to assess the assets of Cochise County, they cannot ignore what is happening in Pima County.

"I have asked myself how does Benson benefit? And I really think it will eventually help, because I see a lot of people moving down here and driving to work."

Scott said since SAEDG was formed, there have been a number of small businesses showing interest in moving to Benson.

"With these developments coming through, I think it will help them make that decision," he said. "They will want to come to Benson because the housing developments will probably get going again, and the rent down here is a lot cheaper than in Tucson."

Besides commercial growth helping the city, Roush said he also feels the continued residential growth in Vail and east Tucson will benefit Benson.

Roush explained Benson is starting to advertise in areas such as Vail to find a more experienced workforce.

"With the bigger population, they definitely have a bigger workforce and we want to attract more qualified people," he said. "Really when you think about it, if people in California are willing to make that commute from San Diego to Los Angeles for work, the drive from Tucson to Benson is a piece of cake."