

Northern Pima County development plan huge

15,900 homes would be built in 14 sq. miles

By Tony Davis

Arizona Daily Star

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 01.11.2008

The State Land Department is planning for a 15,900-home development that could more than quadruple northern Pima County's population.

The department has prepared a draft Arroyo Grande plan outlining the elements of such a development. It would be big enough to house about 38,000 people, or almost as big as Oro Valley's population of 44,000.

The development would span 14 square miles bounded by Oro Valley on the south, Pinal County on the north, Oracle Road on the east and the Tortolita Mountains on the west.

It would bump against the unincorporated community of Catalina, which has about 8,900 residents. Oro Valley officials, who are interested in annexing this land, will get a state presentation on the plan Wednesday.

This will be the fourth big development project discussed for the Tucson area recently. In December, Santa Cruz County supervisors changed their land-use plan to accommodate 9,400 new homes in two projects in the Tubac area. Early this month, Phoenix developer Westcor announced that it would soon secure a permit to create a master plan for a "second city" on 12,000 additional acres of state land on the Southeast Side.

Some key issues with the latest project:

- The land department commits to saving 68 percent of the property as open space. The percentage meets Pima County's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan recommendations — among the country's toughest.
- Less clear is how Oracle Road, the area's only major north-south thoroughfare, will handle up to 150,000 vehicles per day from this project, since the road is heavily congested. A traffic consultant suggests that this could be a perfect place for what's being called a high capacity transit corridor of high-speed buses, a streetcar line or light or heavy rail transit.
- Also unclear is where the water will come from. The town of Oro Valley already faces the possibility of paying \$172 million to bring in Colorado River water to relieve wells that are dropping 5.6 feet per year.

Discussion today

Land Department officials refused to release their draft Arroyo Grande report Thursday, although it was publicly recommended by a 3-0 vote Tuesday by an advisory committee.

Michelle Muench, a Land Department official in Tucson, said state, Oro Valley and county officials will discuss the plan in detail today. Land Commissioner Mark Winkelman must sign off on this plan, as must the Oro Valley Town Council, if it is annexed. "This is just a conceptual plan. We have not even discussed putting the land up for sale," Muench said.

As a way of saying this project will be developed slowly, she estimated that all Land Department holdings in Tucson would probably supply at most 800 acres out of 2,500 acres of all land developed each year in the entire Tucson area.

The open-space-saving plans proposed in this project drew praise or at least qualified support from environmentalist Carolyn Campbell, County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry and Supervisor Ann Day.

Day warned that she wants the plans "cast in stone."

"Council members come and go, supervisors come and go," Day said. "It's important because the county has a conservation lands system, and our Sonoran Desert Plan. Those are tools that Oro Valley doesn't actually have."

Oro Valley Mayor Paul Loomis said he thinks Oro Valley has changed in recent years and has a much closer relationship with Pima County that could lead to assurances that the 68 percent figure will stand.

He said he's not sure Pima County can be a co-signer of an agreement to annex this land, as some county officials want. But "I think we will be able to come up with a document that is acceptable to the two parties of the agreement and all of the interested parties," he said.

A Phoenix planner on the advisory committee said he wonders if this open-space-saving proposal will bring in enough money in a land sale to make the deal worthwhile. Under the Arizona Constitution, state land must reap maximum revenue to finance public education.

"I understand Pima County has their development standards, and that is a laudable goal. But where is the developer input? Where is an economic- feasibility study showing that this is buildable?" said Wayne Balmer, a private planning consultant for the town of Queen Creek and several developers.

Hector Conde of the Oro Valley Neighborhood Coalition said the number of homes is too steep for the land, but said that if officials know what they're doing with the area's wildlife corridor, "it may be OK."

The corridor in that area is one to two miles wide, and "you cannot narrow it. It will not work," Conde said.

The outcome "depends on what the 68 percent looks like and what the other development looks like," said Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Preservation. "This is a critical regional linkage for wildlife between the Tortolita and Catalina mountains, and we don't have much room left."

Job centers planned

Planners hope to hold down the traffic load by creating job centers inside Arroyo Grande so not all residents will commute long distances.

Today, the regional Pima Association of Governments is scheduled to open bids from consultants to conduct a study of high-capacity transit corridors around the county. It would be a "no-brainer" to put a

corridor along Oracle Road, said Curtis Lueck, a transportation consultant on the Land Department advisory committee.