

'Wild Ride' shows plenty going on south of Tucson

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Anyone who hasn't been south of the border - of Tucson, that is - lately would probably be surprised at what they see as they head south on Interstate 19. I know I was.

That was probably part of the point for the fifth annual Wild Ride of the Metropolitan Pima Alliance (MPA), which each year takes participants on a bus tour of new developments, usually focusing on a particular part of the region. There were several hundred people on this year's ride, which took place Thursday (May 8) and took in 28 developments in southern Pima and northern Santa Cruz counties.

The conclusion uppermost in my mind after the 4½-hour tour was that it won't be very many years before I-19 between Tucson and Nogales becomes one continuous stretch of developments.

The Wild Ride was both informative and entertaining, as we picked up tidbits of history and local color while viewing new, burgeoning developments with names including Madera Marketplace, Las Campañas, Sahuarita Palms Plaza, Canoa Ranch, The Retreat at Santa Rita Springs, Madera Reserve, Madera Shadows Estates, Quail Creek, Stone House and Sahuarita Highlands.



'Wild Ride' participants visit Canoa Ranch Sales Center.

There was lots of talk about the 1,200-mile Juan Bautista de Anza National Historical Trail, which begins in Mexico, runs through the area we toured, then cuts over into California. In fact, this year's Wild Ride was called "MPA on a Mission along the Anza Trail."

Driving by row after row of pecan trees, we learned that the area was part of a 5,000-acre pecan orchard that began in 1937, helping to make Arizona the nation's fourth largest pecan-producing state. But one has to wonder how many of those acres near the Town of Sahuarita would survive the onslaught of the dozens of exploding housing projects.

It's not that real estate south of Tucson's border has somehow magically escaped the malaise faced by the rest of the country's real estate. Nobody claimed sales weren't slow just as they are elsewhere. The impressive thing is how much growth is already there.

Sahuarita Mayor Lynne Skelton said her town has seen "explosive" growth of over 500 percent in just the past couple of years and people basically like what is happening.

By far the biggest Sahuarita development, Rancho Sahuarita has firmly established itself as one of 11 top-selling master-planned communities in the United States. The developer, Sharpe and Associates, took "best practices" from planned communities across the country and put it into this community.

As usually happens, retail development has blossomed near the residential growth. Madera Marketplace, a 300,000-square-foot shopping center on 42 acres at the northeast corner of I-19 and Nogales Highway, has a 188,000-square-foot Wal-Mart Supercenter and is 98 percent leased. At the northeast corner of I-19 and Sahuarita Road is the 195,000-square-foot Rancho Sahuarita Marketplace anchored by a 108,000 square-foot Fry's Food Store, the chain's second largest store.

Skelton admits that what Sahuarita is today wasn't what people originally had in mind. They originally talked about incorporation as a way to "preserve the rural lifestyle," she said, then admitted, "It's anything but that today — but we're very pleased with what has happened."

In fact, I learned the corner of Sahuarita Road and Nogales Highway was once the center of town. Today, that corner has a couple of small, older buildings, but not much else. The real growth is in the 30 square miles the town incorporated in 1994. Now, Skelton says, the town is looking at adding another 25 square miles inside its municipal boundaries.

In 1995, Sahuarita's population was about 2,000. Today, it is about 22,000. When all the land inside the town limits is developed, it's expected the population will be 30,000.

That's something for a town that was incorporated because it wanted to avoid becoming a "suburb" of unincorporated Green Valley.

But Sahuarita isn't the only place where growth is booming south of Tucson. Green Valley is still seeing plenty of growth as it attracts people who are 55 and older.

One of Green Valley's developments is Traditions at Desert Creek, a DR Horton development of 188 lots with five floor plans ranging from \$170,000 to \$200,000. This development will even permit 20 percent of its owners to be as young as 45.

The Estates at Alamos has 81 estate home sites on 130 acres, setting what they say is "a new standard for luxurious living" for Green Valley. Priced in the mid-\$500,000s, these homes are on one-acre sites and were designed in the style of the Mexican colonial town of Alamos.

Canoa Ranch, yet another Green Valley development, has 12 floor plans ranging from 1,283 to 2,348 square feet and includes five fitness centers, 12 heated swimming pools, 17 tennis courts and eight golf courses. And since it is an adult community, it also has three billiard rooms, bocce ball and shuffleboard courts.

Moving farther south, into Santa Cruz County, Barrio de Tubac has townhomes from the mid \$200,000s and is within walking distance of the art stores and restaurants of Tubac. The Sanctuary at Tubac Golf Resort has been an attraction to celebrities, including Bing Crosby, Kevin Costner and current owner Ron Alred, who developed Telluride in Colorado. Dorn Homes is creating homes there that are 50 percent to 60 percent more energy efficient than standard homes and range from the high \$300,000s. Embarcadero focuses on second-home buyers. It has Spanish-style homes — with winding iron staircases - ranging from 850 square feet to 1,500 square feet, priced from the mid \$200,000s.

What's planned in northern Santa Cruz County is even more overwhelming. Still in the planning stages, First United Realty's Vistas at Sopori Ranch will be a custom home community of one to eight-acre homesites, surrounded by national forest lands and 400 acres of greenbelts.

Las Mesas, just north of Tubac, is envisioned as a 3,100-home mixed-use development on 1,244 acres. As a master planned community, it will feature an extensive open space network including continuation of the Anza Trail along the Santa Cruz River and a resort and equestrian facility that provide both jobs and tourist opportunities.

Santa Cruz County Supervisor Manny Ruiz made clear his preference for developers to do their share and pay their own way when they develop projects in the county. The county's 50,000 residents have 900 miles of road which he says the county doesn't do a very good job of maintaining.

Ruiz doesn't think it's fair to ask people in Nogales to fund infrastructure for new developments further north, so he wants developers to create private roads, private parks and private water systems for their new communities. He also wants them to think "affordable" when they develop housing. He has apparently persuaded some developers to go along with that thinking. Developers of both Vistas at Sopori Ranch and Las Mesas say they are on board with at least some of those concepts.