

'Jewel' community to rise at proving ground site

Sonu Munshi, Tribune

Developers of a prized east Mesa property say they're on track to turn 3,200 acres of dirt into a "jewel of a destination" for the East Valley.

"Nothing's been done before that's quite like this in the Sonoran Desert," said John Bradley, vice president of DMB Associates, the Scottsdale developer planning to turn the General Motors Proving Ground into a shining example of 21st Century urban development.

Part-owner of the 5,000-acre proving ground, set to be vacated next year, DMB is still submitting key planning documents to Mesa.

A general plan amendment request has been filed and a rezoning application is scheduled to be filed in May. DMB also plans to request annexation of the property into Mesa.

The developer also aims to acquire the city's special "planned community zoning district" designation, allowing greater leeway for projects that include a mixture of land uses.

"That affords a certain amount of flexibility needed for something this large," Bradley said.

But with that kind of a change, encompassing residential, office and retail space, officials at the neighboring Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Airport, west of the property, want to make sure there will be no disruption to the airport.

Airport director Lynn Kusy said he's in constant touch with Mesa and DMB officials to make sure any project revisions work for the airport, too.

The existing general plan does a good job of limiting development to uses compatible with Gateway, Kusy said. Still, he said DMB's plan calls for the entire property to be given the somewhat vague "mixed-use development" designation, so it's difficult for airport officials to voice specific concerns.

"We're cautiously waiting and watching," Kusy said.

Kusy has been doing even more than that. Earlier this month, he joined DMB officials to take a look at their Verrado project, a residential community in Buckeye, and its relationship with nearby Luke Air Force Base, to get a sense of how the company is handling development there.

Bradley said DMB realizes that accommodating the airport is important, and that the city wants Gateway to succeed. He said the proving ground project would complement the area.

"So it's not just a typical industrial landscape but a vibrant zone that can accelerate growth at the airport, too," Bradley said.

Scot Rigby, project manager for Gateway-area economic development, said the city has "liked what we've seen (from DMB)."

It also shares DMB's vision of high-density residential development.

Rigby said any airport has concerns about residential areas developing nearby, but he added the construction materials used to build high-rises help reduce noise problems in the surrounding area. The city will keep flight paths and other noise issues in mind, he said.

"Some people like to live in areas with amenities, traffic and buzz," Rigby said.

District 6 Councilman Scott Somers said the city will consult with Arizona State University's Decision Theater next month as part of an ongoing study for the Gateway area, to understand the impact of flight patterns using three-dimensional models.

"That will help us understand where to place residential," Somers said.

Meanwhile, Mesa is willing to consider designating the area a "community facilities district," which would impose a special tax on individual property owners to fund shared infrastructure.

Somers said cash-strapped Mesa needs to think creatively to tap into available financial resources. It would be the first time Mesa has used the facilities district designation to pay for roads, fire stations, water and other basic facilities through bonding. Only landowners within the district would contribute to repayment of the bonds.

But Somers said there would be a need to make payments affordable for area residents, or else they may not vote for other bonds that would benefit the whole city.

Two years ago, DMB bought the land from General Motors for \$265 million. Real estate firm Pacific Proving LLC owns the other 1,800 acres.

Once the automaker moves to its new facility in Yuma, DMB will start pulling out the test tracks, grade the land and begin construction for some of the commercial and residential blocks in the planned urban core.

While design plans are still pending, DMB has said it would only place a high-density urban core in the northwest part of the property, a considerable distance from the airport. Golf courses are planned on the east side.

Plans also include a business park to be placed closer to a new Gateway terminal that will be developed further east near the DMB property.

Projections for Gateway area include up to 100,000 quality jobs. The expectation is that DMB's development would help jump-start that push to bring a more urban lifestyle to east Mesa.

Bradley said residential areas would be much more dense than the city has seen. While commercial development would be intense, it's still further away in the planning process.

The ability to plan an entire 3,200 acres at once presents a rare opportunity, Bradley said.

"We can treat this as a planned community and do it over a long period of time," he said. "We can't force the market, but looking 20 years out or further, you can rest assured there will be significant commercial employment."

The idea is to drive jobs into east Mesa to reverse the current ratio of jobs to housing, which is about half what it is in the Valley as a whole, Bradley said.

"When we get on the freeways going west and north in the morning, they're full. That can't last, there's just so many freeways you can build," he said.

That will begin with developing some residential and at least two resorts, if possible, to create an attractive place to distinguish the area and drive further commercial development.

Bradley said the challenge is to see the plans come to fruition in what will be decades of development.

"The challenge is to make sure what we see in our mind's eye can be executed and accepted by the market," Bradley said.