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March 18, 2007 - 6:20AM

Approaching buildout impacts Chandler's development

Chris Markham, Tribune

When completed in two years, the 520-acre, 1,000-home Fulton Ranch master-planned community will represent the end of Chandler's 25-year housing boom. After that, the future of residential development in Chandler will mainly be redevelopment.

Builders will have only about 600 acres total for residential development, and the largest subdivisions will have no more than 80 homes. The city that has for years been among the fastest growing in the nation will be forced to evolve from growing outward like neighbors Gilbert and Queen Creek to growing upward like Tempe.

"We've always been this low-density, horizontal community," Chandler's long-range planner Hank Pluster said. "Fortunately, not everyone wants big yards."

As land becomes scarce, development turns vertical, said Wellington Reiter, dean of Arizona State University's College of Design. "This is very typical," Reiter said. "All you need to do is look at historical aerial photographs of different states of cities. You'll see this time and time again."

But as residential development slows to a crawl, so will the impact fees Chandler has depended on to pay for ever-increasing demands for more infrastructure, more public safety resources and more amenities. It gets worse when you combine that with an anticipated drop in state-shared revenue that will come as Chandler's plateaued population fails to keep pace with a climbing statewide head count.

It's no secret Chandler has exploded with new residents and development in the last 20 years. The population has soared from just around 30,000 in the mid-1980s to more than 240,000 today. The city expects to reach about 265,000 people at buildout.

And with those new residents came new houses — lots of them. The city added more than 20,000 new homes just between 2000 and 2005. Today, Chandler has about 94,000 homes.

END OF AN ERA

Fulton Ranch is Chandler's last master-planned community of 600 single-family homes, 89 custom homes and two separate townhouse and condominium neighborhoods situated southwest of Ocotillo Road and Arizona Avenue. Construction began about two years ago and attracted wouldbe home buyers from the start. At its beginning, Fulton Ranch had more than 7,000 names on its initial interest list — even though the project will have only 1,000 new homes.

And the interest never seemed to dwindle. Even now, the developers are seeing about 300 people each week checking out the model houses.

"It's the strongest traffic we've seen in years," Fulton Homes Vice President Dennis Webb said. "It's that last piece of Chandler, and people want to be in Chandler. It's unbelievable."

Homes in Fulton Ranch range from the low \$200,000 to multimillion-dollar custom homes and, so far, about 130 units have sold.

The developer, Fulton Homes, has no immediate plans to move beyond building single-family homes.

"That's our forte," Webb said. "But you never know, if we completely run out of land, we'll have to do something different."

But there's still plenty of land to develop outside Chandler, like Gilbert, Queen Creek and Maricopa. And when that's done, there's always Pinal County and the West Valley, Webb said.

LOOKING UP

The city has already begun seeing midrise condominium and apartment projects enter its development pipeline. The now stalled Elevation Chandler project was the city's most notable entry into the high-rise development and, if completed as originally planned, will become the city's tallest building at 15 stories and will host highend condos, a luxury hotel and a health club next to Chandler Fashion Center.

City officials recently approved plans for the Metropolitan, a 12-acre, \$100 million mixed-use project that will combine 60,000 square feet of retail space, 342 condominiums and 38,000 square feet of offices, also near Chandler Fashion Center.

And Chandler adopted a midrise policy last year that dictates how high buildings can get and where they'll be allowed. The new policy requires specific City Council approval for buildings taller than 45 feet and designates zones near Chandler Fashion Center, Chandler Airpark and a few areas along the city's freeways to develop the taller structures.

But the policy doesn't limit taller buildings to the specific districts. For example, redeveloping a struggling or failed shopping center or underused industrial site into a high-density residential project is allowed under the city's rules.

And city planners expect to come up with high-rise policies in the next couple of years that will designate downtown Chandler as its future urban core — open to projects resembling the 22-story condos currently going up near Mill Avenue in Tempe.

Tempe reached buildout just a few years ago and the city is now redeveloping on a vertical scale.

"It was almost an overnight phenomenon that we dealt with in an ad hoc fashion," said Chris Salomone, Tempe's community development manager.

Tempe officials are confident that 300-foot towers in their downtown will be successful. But they also acknowledge the three-dimensional simulations and hordes of planning that went into going upward won't replace actual experience.

"I think the visible reality of this will be tested in the next couple of months," Salomone said.

And that's not all that remains unknown, he said.

For instance, city planners still don't know for sure who will live in the high-rise condos. If they're mainly full-time residents, the urban direction should work well. But if the units become second homes for out-of-towners and retirees, it could ruin what Tempe was trying to do.

"That's incredibly important because the principals of urban infill development ... really are based on the fact you'll have a 24-hour residential community living in your urban core," Salomone said.

Chandler's about to be pushed in the same direction, with redevelopment being key in future residential projects.

But getting builders interested in redevelopment can be tricky. It's always cheaper to build on undeveloped land, which means city officials will be facing pressure from builders to rezone land currently set aside for future commercial and industrial projects.

"You're seeing that already," Webb said. "You're seeing where parcels have gone from industrial to single-family, and I think they're going to have to be careful."

CHALLENGES

The pressure hasn't been as intense as in neighboring communities, but it's still there, Pluster said.

"It's kind of like they're respecting our planning processes and general plan," he said.

The political pressure to rezone land for residential development is something most landlocked cities go through at some point, said Paul Lewis, an assistant professor who teaches political science at Arizona State University.

"It can be a pretty difficult transition for some places," he said. "The type of politics involved in basically paving over virgin soil seems to be quite different from what it takes to redevelop an area."

Resisting that pressure will be a test of fortitude for future City Councils in Chandler, Pluster said.

"You have to remember who your ultimate customers are," he said. "They're the residents of Chandler."

The city will bank on increasing its place as an employment center as it looks for ways to replace the development impact fees that will stop coming in after buildout. And that means Chandler simply cannot afford to give away its nonresidential land, Pluster said. "I think the decisions we make today equal those we made about where freeways should go 20 years ago," he said.

Chandler doesn't distinguish its impact fee collections by residential and nonresidential, meaning the city could not say exactly how much it will lose once those fees stop coming in. But overall, impact fee collections have decreased over the past three years — from \$37.4 million in 2004 to \$29 million in 2006.

Officials plan to replace the growing shortfall with increased fees from commercial and industrial development. And while the city is nearly landlocked for residential development, officials estimate Chandler won't fill up its commercial and industrial-zoned areas before 2030.

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Thursday, October 23, 2008 | 1:37 pm



FINISHING TOUCHES: A construction crew smooths out wet cement Wednesday for waterfront walking paths in the Fulton Ranch community in Chandler. The homes are part of the city's last large-scale development as land disappears.

Leigh Shelle Robertus, Tribune

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