

VEGAS SUBURB IN ARIZONA

DEVELOPER BETS ON BYPASS TO LURE COMMUTERS

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Chris Offe, assistant project manager for the Hoover Dam bypass, walks along the Nevada approach to the Colorado River bridge, due for completion in 2008. It could open northwestern Arizona to development. Photos by Mark Henle/The Arizona Republic

As Leonard Mardian wheels past vacant mine shafts and crumbling windmills in the Joshua tree-covered northwestern Arizona hills, his dreams are as large as anyone else rolling the dice 50 miles north in Las Vegas.

Some day, Mardian says, his wild, remote Ranch at White Hills, south of Hoover Dam, will be home to 100,000 urban refugees fleeing high prices and congestion. It will be Las Vegas' own personal Arizona suburb.

The four-lane bridge that will bypass the narrow U.S. 93 across Hoover Dam will be good to go in a little more than three years, cutting the commute time for Las Vegas-area workers to about an hour. Meanwhile, Las Vegas is becoming increasingly landlocked in all other directions.

Mohave County officials, who in December approved Mardian's master plan to build up to 34,727 homes on his nearly 40 square miles of land, say this is just one of many proposals to develop the vast, largely barren area between Kingman and Lake Mead because of the Hoover Dam bypass.

Approaches on the Arizona side of the \$234 million Sugarloaf Mountain bridge project, one-fourth mile downriver from the dam, are nearly complete and the remainder of the work will focus on completing the nearly 2,000-foot bridge and approaches on the Nevada side.

Two other Las Vegas developers have bought chunks of land near White Hills. The rampant land speculation has extended another 30 miles to the south beyond the Arizona community of Dolan Springs and just north of Golden Valley, an unincorporated community between Kingman and

Laughlin, Nev.

"It's just out of control," said Kevin Davidson, a Mohave County land planner. "The most amazing thing about it all is that we were still seeing land up in that White Hills area being given up for back taxes as recently as 1999."

That land now is being listed for about \$20,000 an acre.

"It's still hard for me to envision why people would leave a state with no state income taxes like Nevada to go across the border," Davidson said. "I would just encourage everyone to watch out and make sure there are things like sewage (lines) and gutter (lines)."

No problem, Mardian says.

Plenty of water?

The Las Vegas developer, who has a background in hotel and warehouse construction, muses about how he can do wonders for all those casino workers blinking at the nearly \$300,000 median housing price in Las Vegas.

Mardian says his water experts, one of whom even witched a couple of wells, say not to worry, that there's plenty within 900 feet of the surface, about the same level as the Colorado River. Never been touched by human lips, they say, except for wandering cowpunchers.

Paved roads, electricity and communication lines already are nearby, and he says he plans to run his own water company.

Then, there are all the innovations and perks in his project, such as a 4,600-acre renewable-energy park on the steeply graded southern part of the property that will have wind- and solar-energy production.

Also, two golf courses, guest ranches and equestrian trails interspersed with the development.

Mardian said that more than 23,000 of the residences would be centered in a core area, which would be located on less than 15 percent of the land. But there are other bridges to cross.

The federal Bureau of Land Management still has several key 640-acre checkerboard sections that Mardian needs for his subdivisions. The federal agency in recent years also has let the trade value of land it manages rise so more land can be acquired for the public domain in land swaps.

Also, the development will require a lot of water from a largely untested subterranean water basin. Average yearly rainfall in the area is about 11.5 inches. Phoenix averages 8.29 inches.

But Mardian said he already has spent \$1.5 million on water-related studies and has seen nothing to dissuade him from believing that he can build all of the nearly 35,000 homes that he intends to build. He also said he has hired a consultant with extensive knowledge of groundwater in the area.

On a recent tour of the ranch, Mardian stopped at what he said was one of 19 wells in the area. He dropped a rock in a well casing, and it splashed into the water 20 feet below. Then he took out two metallic "water witching" sticks and demonstrated their potency at finding water beneath the



surface.

The Arizona Department of Water Resources is taking a wait-and-see approach. State law requires Mardian to prove that he has a guaranteed 100-year supply of water.

“We’ve not received a request yet to determine if there is adequate water,” said Jack Lavelle, a Department of Water Resources spokesman. “No one in the agency here has done a hydrologic examination in that area for 15 years.”

Lavelle said Mardian legally can build and market the area as long as he tells prospective buyers that the state has not determined if there is an assured 100-year supply of water.

Adequate supply

A preliminary water report by Allen, Stephenson & Associates of Phoenix estimated that there is 2.5 million acre-feet of groundwater in the upper Detrital Valley, near the heart of the development, and that “this should be adequate to provide a 100-year supply.”

The report indicated that the development at build-out would use about 15,000 acre-feet of water a year. An acre-foot of water is 325,851 gallons, the amount that would cover an acre to the depth of 1 foot. It would meet the needs of a family of five for a year.

Enough water or not, some residents down the road in Dolan Springs don’t like the rumblings they are hearing.

“I’d rather it (the development) not happen,” said Ernest Smith, who left Casa Grande and bought a ranchette three miles north of Dolan Springs two years ago. “Most people bought out here because it’s nice and quiet, and that would put a stop to that.”

Smith said land in the Dolan Springs area also jumped about 25 percent in value in the past two years. “I had designs on buying a piece of land for an alcohol- and drug-recovery center, but all the inflation has put an end to that,” Smith said.

Valene Taylor, who owns a construction company in Bear Lake, Idaho, and spends her winters in Dolan Springs, said the more people to the region the merrier. “It’s going to help all of our economy here and really what options are there?” Taylor asked. “The house that my sister-in-law owns in Vegas has gone up in value from \$300,000 to \$750,000 in the last three years, and you have people up there so desperate for homes that they are taking part in lotteries.

“What’s a one-hour drive if you can afford a home?”

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