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Pinal housing set to go boom

Top builder to develop in rural county

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The first major housing development in south-central Pinal County is on the drawing boards, signaling new growth in a previously undeveloped part of the county.

Red Rock Village, which will be built by Pulte Homes, eventually will have nearly 4,000 homes just south of Interstate 10 between Picacho Peak and Marana.

While Pinal County has seen an explosion in home development, the growth had not extended south of Interstate 10 as this development does. The planned community will be about 80 miles from Phoenix and 40 miles from Tucson. Sales of the single-family homes are expected to begin in April with the first homes ready for occupancy in late 2006 or early 2007, said Shawn Chlarson, president of Pulte's Tucson division. The first phase calls for 450 homes, with plans for a seven-year build-out.

Pulte didn't release specific selling prices, but prices are expected to be "\$20,000 to \$40,000" less than typical new-home prices in northwest Tucson. The average price of a new home in that area is about \$286,000, Chlarson said.

Red Rock is an unincorporated town of residents involved mostly in farming and ranching. Mary Aguirre-Vogler, a lifelong resident of Red Rock who also serves on the Pinal County Planning Commission, said she's concerned about how new residents will change the rural character of the area.

"Retiring farms is one thing," she said. "Opening up desert land is another."

The development was announced after Pulte finalized a deal to buy 1,013 acres from Diamond Ventures, which is headed by Tucson developer Don Diamond, for \$28.4 million, or about \$28,000 per acre. Calls to Diamond Ventures were not returned.

Pulte officials said the development should offer a cheaper alternative to Tucson residents. "We felt it was a great opportunity to provide some affordability in the Tucson market that doesn't exist today," Chlarson said.

Pulte considers the development close enough for residents to commute to Tucson for work. It is about 36 miles from the Red Rock Interstate exit to downtown Tucson, according to Mapquest.com

About 43 acres of the site will be set aside for commercial development, most likely retail stores. Another 140 acres of open space and recreational areas are planned, including 11 miles of trails, a swimming complex and a 25-acre sports complex and park. The homebuilder also is donating 26 acres for two K-8 schools in the area and plans to work with the Red Rock Elementary School District to find funding to build the schools. Red Rock's elementary school has 93 students.

Lionel Ruiz, who represents the area on the Pinal County Board of Supervisors, said he expects that the area eventually will become an employment base with distribution centers and other industry along Interstate 10.

He said he hopes the Pulte subdivision will provide housing options for workers at the nearby Pinal Air Park. That park is leased to Evergreen Air Center Inc., a global aviation-services firm with about 400 employees and about 150 contractors.

An earlier plan by Scottsdale-based developer George Johnson to build up to 50,000 homes at La Osa Ranch, not far from the current Pulte project, drew a wave of criticism last year, including a multi-count lawsuit from the state that accused him of bulldozing land before he had state permits and approval.

The Pulte project is much smaller than La Osa Ranch project but still has not gained support from at least one Tucson environmental group.

"It's just leapfrog sprawl out in the middle of nowhere," said David Patterson, an ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity in Tucson. "In general, the public interest favors development closer to existing urban areas."

Chlarson said retailers follow the housing market, just as it has at other Pulte developments. Pulte's biggest Arizona project is Anthem in north Phoenix. Pulte's Del Webb division is also planning an Anthem "lifestyle" development near Florence, the government seat of Pinal County. The plan calls for 9,000 homes on 3,200 acres along Hunt Highway.

Pulte said the Red Rock Village land already has been zoned for housing and will need to go before county officials only on smaller issues.

"One of the reasons this was attractive was: we could purchase the land one year and close houses on it the next year, which is rarity in the homebuilding industry," Chlarson said.

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