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Top Stories

Coolidge is expecting growth to follow recent preparations

By BRIAN AHNMARK, Staff Writer January 16, 2006

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COOLIDGE - The waiting is the hardest part, and now the payoff is coming.

In 2006, City Manager Bob Flatley expects years of annexations, development agreements and zoning alterations to come to fruition.

"This is really the beginning of our growth period," he said. "Two years ago, we only had about 30 building permits. This year, we're over 600." Flatley expects 1,500 to 2,000 building permits in 2006 - "and that's just our conservative projection, primarily for houses" - then a steady stream of 3,000 to 3,500 building permits for the next four or five years.

Much of 2004-05 was dedicated to the development and design of master-planned communities beginning to shape the surrounding desert into a residential mecca. The upcoming year will see the grading of the land for these housing developments, with some construction expected throughout the year. Heartland Ranch, Meritage and McClellan Meadows are a handful of the developments moving forward with construction, while master-planned communities Verona and Pivotal are expected to begin grading in 2006 and construction in 2007.

The big challenge for the city will be finding "quality, competent staff" to meet the demands of growth. Additional positions will likely open in the fields of planner, inspector, public works, support staff, police and fire services.

"We're getting ready, and we're still ahead of the curve," Flatley said.

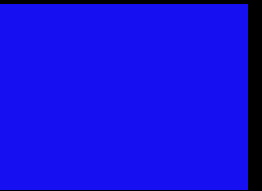
The city is currently working on a Capital Improvement Plan, which will project capital purchases over the next five years. The CIP covers any item costing more than \$10,000 with a longevity in excess of five years, such as fire trucks, police cars and office space.

Business and retail

Beyond houses, a Walgreen's drugstore and Checker Auto Parts store are going up quickly in the Coolidge Gateway on the northern edge of the city. Flatley looks for retail expansion to continue.

"The more rooftops we bring into the city, the better market it is for retailers - if there are enough people as potential buyers," he said. In the Coolidge Industrial Park, Mesa Plumbing is moving forward with grading and construction. Mesa Fully Formed, a designer of counter tops, is also expected to begin building a Coolidge factory in 2006.

Flatley said the development of light industry would be critical for the city's growth.




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"A city can't exist without industry," he said. "Industrial revenue is four times better than any other type of revenue. With industry, you get about four dollars for every one you spend. Residential areas are about one-to-one, and retail is about two-to-one." The reason for this is because industry typically does not require many services - such as security or a parks and recreation department - that residential and retail areas need.

"When you look at the revenue stream, industry is a saving grace for cities and brings jobs to the area," Flatley said. And without industry, a tax increase is often the only solution to budget shortfalls.

"I've never raised taxes yet, and I don't want to start," he added.

Freeway and SRP

Two stories that dominated Pinal County headlines this year may prove to be intertwined: the 500-kilovolt energy transmission line under development by Salt River Project, and a proposed Arizona Department of Transportation north-south freeway corridor through the Coolidge-Florence area. Flatley said Coolidge city officials met with SRP this month to discuss how the projected eastside placement of the power lines in the Coolidge area would affect a future Westcor regional shopping center site east of the city.

"SRP realizes that ADOT has chosen their alignment for a highway, and they seem to think the two can work together," Flatley said. "This is something we suggested almost two years ago; if you're going to build, disturb the area one time only and put the high power lines and the expressway in the same right of way. They're actually looking like they're going to do that."

ADOT has produced a broad study area that will be concentrated to establish the precise right of way. An exact centerline has not yet been determined, but could head east toward Florence from northern Pinal County or south to Arizona 287 and the Coolidge area. Either way, the freeway should bring increased traffic to Coolidge.

SRP also has a broad projected path for the 500-kV power line, ranging from a half-mile to one-mile wide as it winds through Pinal County. Flatley said the company should complete a centerline and begin acquiring the necessary property in 2006.

Shopping centers

With a Westcor deal "sealed in place," the city has turned its attentions to Vestar, a large builder of big-box power centers such as Target. Vestar officials have been in touch with Coolidge staff for the past month and a half to discuss commercial opportunities near the intersection of Arizona 287 and Attaway Road; the city has now annexed all four corners of the intersection.

A current proposed annexation of "Section 7" northeast of the intersection would bring more territory into the city and firm up this area for future development. While the city has yet to collect the necessary majority of signatures from property owners in that area, Flatley said he expects the annexation to be "a done deal" in 2006. Any commercial construction would most likely take place on the east side of Attaway Road.

The city is currently 35 square miles; it was about six square miles when Flatley took over as city manager in 2001. He said the city could potentially grow to 125 square miles.

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Airport

The city has currently annexed as much land as possible up to state-owned property surrounding Coolidge Municipal Airport. In order to achieve the ultimate goal of annexing the airport, Coolidge must go through the "long, tedious" process of acquiring this state land.

There are now four hangars completed at the airport, plus two under construction, three more permitted, and one large hangar that was dismantled in Chandler and relocated to Coolidge. There are plans to expand and modernize the south hangar, which currently houses an operation through Complete Parachute Solutions to train 45 to 50 Marines each week.

Fire station

Based on a fire study, the city has plans to hire firefighters and build a permanent new fire station. Chief Mickey McHugh said that while plans for a temporary fire station in the interim are tentative, the facility will be located on the south side of town and will primarily serve that area.

"We finally have the funding we need," McHugh said. "In the past, our CAPs have basically been wish lists with no money. Hopefully, the growth will bring in the money to fund the fire department."

Parks

Flatley said the design for the eastside park along Christensen Road is "just about ready to go."

"As for Regional Park, who knows?" he said. Regional Park has been closed since August 2003 as the city conducted chemical tests on the soil there. The area was formerly a crop-dusting airfield, and concerns arose that lingering chemicals were causing illnesses.

Flatley explained that Arcadis, the company responsible for the \$100,000 Regional Park chemical study, has headquarters in New Orleans. Because of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina, Flatley said, Arcadis has delayed the finalized results of the study. Flatley said he was not at liberty to discuss the fate of the park until the results are released by the City Council.

Sewer plant

The long-awaited expansion of the Coolidge wastewater treatment plant will begin in 2006. The first stages of construction involve three bids for a total of \$5.1 million, all of which will be raised from developers pre-paying connection fees. The construction process is expected to take about a year and a half, and will include a major headworks and an effluent pump station. An effluent line will carry treated water south to the La Palma/Randolph area for use on farm field crops.

The project will increase the capacity of the plant from 1 million gallons per day to 2 MGD, with the potential to add another 1 MGD to the capacity with some additional work.

"Then we need to immediately get busy on the design of our first mechanical system," Flatley said. This stand-alone unit will be a 2 MGD capacity prototype that will create grade A-plus effluent for use in parks and golf courses. The mechanical plants will allow the city to dry out the former effluent storage

lagoons, which have been accused of producing odor. A series of 2 MGD plants will be built in future years to keep up with growth in the city.

All plants will be paid for by development. Sewer connection fees are a flat \$2,890 per home site for developers, part of a \$4,650 overall impact fee that will be adjusted every couple of years. The impact fees could potentially be raised to about \$8,000, although the sewer pre-payment fees will remain the same.

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