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Coolidge News

Paying for city growth, Part 2 of 2

By PRESTON McCONKIE, Staff Writer August 03, 2005
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Between Sandia and the area where unfinished homes are currently popping up, there are several other PADs with developers anxious to start building and selling, and this month they will bring plans to the City Council for an improvement district to finance the laying of miles of 20-inch sewer pipe. The pipe system will serve nearly four square miles of new city territory, and the bill could run as high as \$18 million.

For perspective, the entire 2004-05 city budget was \$18 million; the budget for next year is about \$50 million.

Much of that will be through expected grants and bond sales. Improvement districts are financed through municipal bonds guaranteed by the faith and credit of the city they fall within, and are repaid through liens placed on properties within the served area. The liens are collected in payments spread over as many as 20 years and billed in the same manner as property taxes.

However, the city is willing to carry only so much debt, so other Coolidge developers are hoping to organize community facilities districts (CFDs) to fund the building of parks, major roads, a fire station and other public infrastructure.

CFDs differ from improvement districts only in that the bonds are secured against the value of the property they serve and not guaranteed by the city, though the city appoints a CFD committee - usually its City Council. Because CFDs are not guaranteed by government, investors demand a higher rate of return.

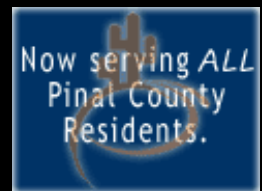
Job supply

Although Coolidge seems destined for rapid expansion for several years, the supply of local jobs compared to residents is shrinking.

Except for a Mesa Fully Formed countertop factory expected to be finished next year at the Coolidge Industrial Park, the city has few prospects for commercial development. City Manager Bob Flatley has assured the council that once rooftops come, business growth is inevitable.

But so far the arrival of rooftops has already kept one business out. Early development has clustered around the city's sewer plant and mostly-empty industrial park. In March, the council refused to allow a meat packing plant to be built on land purchased for that purpose in 2001. A delay in building the plant, brought on by new federal regulations after the mad cow disease scare, meant

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that by the time owner Jason Holliday had gathered enough money to upgrade the planned facility, developers had bought nearby property and crowded into public hearings to object to the project.

Now the largest business prospect on the horizon is for a regional mall to be built by Westcor Development Partners, which is also planning a 950,000-square-foot mall in Casa Grande.

A 300-acre parcel of land on the city's east side is also slated for what Westcor representatives are calling a regional mall. During a presentation to the council in November, Westcor attorney Jordan Rose said the project would begin "once the area reaches around 100,000 residents."

Population growth

Westcor representative Brian Frakes said, "The market will determine the timetable. It really depends on how fast rooftops go up."

With the planned site within 15 miles of the proposed Casa Grande mall, the contemplated 600,000-square-foot Coolidge mall will await massive population growth in Pinal County.

"Coolidge will probably be around fifty- or sixty-thousand residents in ten years," Bruce said in November. "This (mall) isn't happening tomorrow."

Not to say the growth isn't dramatic and explosive already. Last year the city sold 215 housing permits; it's on track for more than 900 during 2005. Peters remembers just two years ago when he didn't have a single dirt road to deal with; today he has miles of unpaved roads in the expanding city, with no prospect of getting them paved until developers build along them.

Like other cities, Coolidge is trying to learn from areas closer to the Valley recently swamped by infrastructure-straining growth, and to meet the challenge without raising taxes on current residents.

In June, Flatley persuaded the council to raise the city's construction tax from 3 percent to 4 percent. The tax, levied on 65 percent of the sale price of newly-built homes, is expected to bring about \$800,000 into the city's coffers during the next fiscal year - and unlike money collected from development fees, it can be used to repair streets and revitalize the decaying downtown.

"Cities like Chandler that are nearly built out have their impact fees around \$17,000, and they're in a panic trying to find the money to pay for all the new infrastructure," Flatley said. "We don't want to wait until we're at that point."

Protecting the airport

Part of Flatley's plan for bringing business to Coolidge after the houses come is to annex out to the Coolidge Municipal Airport and zone much of the surrounding land for industrial uses. He has said this is also a necessary measure to protect the airport from encroachment by housing developments.

In mid-July, the city held special meetings of its Planning and Zoning Commission and City Council to approve adding a new zoning category to accommodate Westcor's planned mall. A major reason for the rush was a petition to annex hundreds of acres of east-side land that expires on August 25. The land where the mall is planned lies between the city and the airport, and Westcor's signature was needed on the petition.

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Once the land is zoned and the airport protected, city staff have visions of it becoming a vital center of industry to eventually balance the burgeoning bedroom community springing up to the west.

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