

Long-awaited Arizona development to arrive with Hoover Dam bypass

At Rosie's Den, the friendly folks sell scores of lottery tickets and cook up pancakes the size of flying saucers.

But if you want to learn something that really defies the odds and is truly out of this world, ask about the rise in land prices around this cafe located on U.S. 93, about 50 miles southeast of Las Vegas.

You'll receive knowing nods, distant gazes, and the sense that we'd all be millionaires if we only had a pancake-sized piece of this tumbleweed-riddled landscape.



John L. Smith, Commentary

Hitch Larsen and his mother, the original Rosie, bought the Den in 1984, back when the area might as well have been a million miles from Las Vegas. People came to this stretch of the desert to get away from the city, not to build one.

Not that Larsen hasn't seen his share of slick speculators and daffy dreamers. Around the Den, when someone cracks that a job will be done "in two weeks," it's an inside joke about the 2-decade-old golf course project a developer promised was going to break ground in just a little while longer.

From the look of things, "two weeks" will finally arrive in 2008.

That's when the \$234 million Hoover Dam bypass bridge project is scheduled to be completed. It will substantially cut travel time from northwest Arizona to Southern Nevada. With Las Vegas home prices rocketing out of sight, several developers plan to create a commuters' suburb in the White Hills.

Don't go house hunting just yet, but if builders Leonard Mardian, Jim Rhodes and others have their way, one day more than 100,000 people will reside in Arizona and work in Las Vegas. Mardian calls his project the Ranch at White Hills. So far, Rhodes has been more circumspect, and other land buyers are flying even further under the radar.

Just a decade ago, you could have purchased a ranch with cattle included in the area for about the price of a new Cadillac. Initially, Mohave County residents must have suspected that Mardian had wandered too long in the desert without a hat. But all that's changed in recent months.

This end of Arizona has no shortage of real estate for sale. Signs advertising prime land and future developments dot the landscape. If you've dreamed of living with mostly coyotes for company, for now it remains a good place.

East of Kingman, rural land still goes for \$4,000 an acre in some places where groundwater is deep. West of Kingman as you drop into Golden Valley and, farther on toward the White Hills and the Nevada line, the price rises to \$50,000 an acre and higher.

One longtime landowner told me he'd just sold his last 5-acre parcel for \$200,000. He sounded almost like he was second-guessing his decision, like maybe he should have held out a while longer.

After so many years of attracting nothing but tumbleweeds, the sudden attention must have come as a helluva shock.

At Rosie's Den, Hitch Larsen keeps his sense of humor about the land rush and eventual changes coming to the area. Newcomers will be in for a few surprises.

"You go to the grocery store and you forget the milk, it's a 120-mile round-trip to go back and get milk," Larsen says. "People moving out here have to adjust to a totally different way of life here."

That includes adjusting to the ranchers, miners, hermits, bikers, old hippies and assorted other characters attracted to the big silence, wide-open spaces and glorious sunrises and sunsets. It's a beautiful place for those who can live and let live.

These days, Larsen splits his time between business at the cafe and showing prospective buyers the family's available land parcels in the White Hills.

"Now I wish we would have bought more land," he says. "We bought this place with the business and everything for less than what an acre of property on Highway 93 goes for now. You have to look at it in perspective when you have land going for \$400,000 an acre in Vegas now. Once that bridge gets put in, that'll save at least another 15 minutes. It'll be 45 to 50 minutes to downtown. It takes that long to drive from the south end to the north end of Vegas on a busy day."

These days, tumbleweed never looked so good.

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