

Vegas Suburb May Rise From the Tumbleweeds

Developers Eye Arizona Desert for Spillover Growth

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WHITE HILLS, Ariz. -- This high-plains desert is so lonely you can drive for miles without spotting a house, or even passing another car. The nearest grocery store lies 20 miles of bad road away and is so inadequate that the few who dare to live here would rather drive the extra hour to Sam's Club.

The jobs dried up pretty much when the silver mines did, which is to say a century ago, leaving a scattering of historical markers for ghost towns that have all but dissolved into the earth. And water is so scarce that when locals take their showers, Pat McGinnis explains, "you get wet, then turn it off and get good and sudsy" before turning the tap back on to rinse.

This could very well be America's next great bedroom community.

A city or something like it could blossom in this no-man's-swath of northwestern Arizona as the nation's hottest housing market -- Las Vegas -- begins to spill over its traditional borders.

A sleek \$234 million bypass now under construction will soon replace U.S. Highway 93's winding two-lane bottleneck across Hoover Dam, 40 miles northwest of here. When it is opened in 2008, the new road will slice at least half an hour off the 90-minute drive to Vegas -- and open a new housing frontier for the growing Sin City workforce. Already, two developers are talking up plans to build 55,000 homes in this sand-scoured landscape that now boasts less than six people per square mile. Several other builders are quietly buying up land.



Share that news with the current residents -- many of whom moved here to get away from city life -- and you may get a hot dose of denial in response. "It can't grow that big," scoffed McGinnis, a retiree from Missouri who operates a roadside gift shop in neighboring Dolan Springs.

It's a typical reaction in the rapidly changing West -- and it's almost always wrong, said Rob Melnick, director of the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University. With housing prices soaring in most of the region's metropolitan areas, the most desolate places are now the hottest spots for development.

"Thirty years ago, if you had said there will be this huge growth out here, people would have laughed their heads off," said Melnick, an expert in urban growth. "We're poking into all kinds of areas that you wouldn't have believed."

After all, residents of Los Angeles once looked at the acres of oil rigs and citrus groves to the south and never imagined anyone would want to live there. Today, Orange County is home to 3 million people. And

what were vast fields of cotton and grain several years ago are now the dense suburban flanks of Phoenix.

Las Vegas itself was little more than a dusty railroad crossing until well after World War II, when the casinos began to morph into resort destinations. But after decades of steady gains through the mid-20th century, the growth of the Las Vegas Valley went nuclear in the '90s. A booming job market and a warm, dry climate did even more than the excitement of the famed Strip to lure tens of thousands of new residents every year. In two decades, the population of Clark County has tripled, to 1.7 million.

Yet Las Vegas's surging size quickly came up against constraints -- mountain ranges on three sides, and a patchwork of federal lands that are off-limits to development. With no place left to sprawl, the city has been suffering a housing shortage that drove up average home prices by 36 percent in 2004 -- the largest increase in the country -- and pushed the median price for a resale beyond \$240,000, well out of reach for first-time buyers earning modest pay at the city's casinos and hotels.

These are the forces that are poised to send people, and developers, to the most rugged reaches of the desert. Places such as White Hills. This unincorporated community, founded in 1892, peaked shortly thereafter -- with 12 saloons and two cemeteries -- before it was wiped out in a flash flood. Now it's mainly a lot of hills and flats and Joshua trees, punctuated by a couple hundred widely spaced homes, most of them modulars or trailers. There's one diner, on the far side of U.S. 93; a single convenience store, operating off someone's back porch; and no post office.

"You have to look at the available land supplies, what is available for private use," said Frederick E. Chin, chief operating officer for Las Vegas-based Rhodes Homes. By the time the bypass is completed, Rhodes plans to be well on its way to building more than 20,000 dwellings on the 2,000 acres it now owns here, along with an "urban center" of retail development and other services. If the homes were already in place today, Chin said, they would probably be priced in the mid \$100,000s, compared with the high \$300,000s commanded by similar properties in the Las Vegas Valley. "We look at this [area] as a viable alternative for a lot of the employment that is going to happen" in Las Vegas, he said.

Fran Vance does not intend to stick around to see it.

Vance, 58, delivered mail in Las Vegas for 18 years before fleeing to a more wholesome place to raise her young grandsons. In White Hills, their household is off the grid -- they get their electricity from a propane generator and have their water trucked in. Her husband visits on the weekends from his job in the city, and her little boys have the freedom to run and hike and ride their ATVs with six-foot flags on the back so she can spot them over the cactuses. She can't bear the idea that it's all about to change.

"I'm selling out," she grumbled. "It's going to be another Pahrump" -- a tiny Nevada town not far from Las Vegas that grew from 10,000 to 30,000 over the past decade -- "and that's a mess!"

The state chapter of the Sierra Club opposed the bypass for similar reasons. "Whenever you build roads, you usually end up driving development," said outreach director Sandy Bahr, who bemoaned the diminishing of Arizona's wide-open spaces.

"If someone just came in and bulldozed a bunch of large trees, just put in acre after acre of tile-roof houses, there would be generally a greater sense of outrage," she said. "There's great value in these desert areas from an ecological perspective."

In fact, a number of hurdles await developers with their eye on the White Hills area. They still must obtain a number of state and local permits. Some own land that is hemmed in by federal properties that they will have to persuade the Bureau of Land Management to swap or sell.

Not surprisingly, the biggest obstacle will be water. Mohave County officials say they will require developers to demonstrate they can tap into a 100-year supply of water for whatever housing they build. They also raise concerns about how to provide services such as police and fire protection to a booming but remote population. "All these people are going off the page," said County Manager Ron Walker. "My question is: How do I fund this?"

The region's few businesspeople, though, applaud the imminent changes. "This area is so depressed," said John McNeely, owner of Sheps Miners Inn in Chloride, the only hotel on the 80-mile stretch from the dam to Kingman, Ariz. "It will help the tax base."

And many White Hills settlers have had their heads turned by the phenomenal growth of their land prices. Acre-and-a-quarter lots that sold for \$2,000 or \$3,000 just a few years ago are now moving for \$15,000; signs promising "lots for sale" line both the highways and the unpaved county roads.

Some feel as if it's already starting to get pretty crowded. "I used to go out in the yard in my underwear," said Tom Lusk, a longtime resident who works for a local developer. "I can't anymore. I got neighbors."

Of course, that's been Pat Kwast's impression for more than 22 years now -- practically ever since she moved to the desert. "They cluttered it up with houses," said Kwast, a cook at Rosie's Den on U.S. 93.

She's not fond of the changes but says she'll weather them, maybe get to make some jokes at the "city slickers" she sees plopping down \$80,000 for a little house.

"Sweetheart, it's progress," she said with a sigh, taking a break at the counter. "Things change -- that's the energy of everything. Everybody knows you can't stop progress."

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