

New homes could take the place of pecan trees

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Sahuarita's pecan groves may someday be subdivisions, stores and offices.

The owners of Farmers Investment Co., known as FICO, said last week they expect to submit a development plan for the company's 7,000 acres later this summer. They're seeking ideas for development proposals at a series of public meetings starting late this month.

But it could be decades before homes or businesses rise on the fields of pecan trees that have become a fixture in the local landscape east of Green Valley, stretching 14 miles from Pima Mine Road on the north to Continental Road on the south.

Dick and Nan Walden, who run FICO, say they plan to keep their farming business going for the foreseeable future. But they said they want to "get ahead of the growth" by preparing a plan now, when the real estate market is fallow, rather than wait until another boom rolls in when landowners must respond quickly with a development outline.

They're planning what they call sustainable development where people would "live, work and play." In their vision, riparian groves along 12 miles of the Santa Cruz River on their property would be restored, land would be set aside for a light rail line and homes would be balanced with jobs and stores.

Details will be available after a formal plan is released, said Dick Walden, whose late father, Keith, founded FICO in Southern California back in 1937.

"We want our kids and grandkids to have a comprehensive blueprint for the future, so when times get tough like they do in farming, they will have a guide for how the lands should be developed and how the river corridor should be preserved and used by the public," Nan Walden said.

Unlike many Southern Arizona developments, their project would actually reduce their land's use of water. Homeowners typically consume less water per acre than crops.

Val Little, director of the Water Conservation Alliance of Southern Arizona, said the Waldens can easily meet their goal of cutting water use in half, particularly with the highly efficient, low-water use plumbing fixtures installed in today's new homes. Currently, the pecan groves use about 28,000 acre-feet of water per year, enough for at least 85,000 people.

The outlook is less clear, however, for the Waldens' goal of balancing jobs, retail and large employment centers to avoid long work commutes. The Waldens say they'll model their project on mixed-use projects in the Phoenix area and Southern California, along with historic "new town" developments in Reston, Va., and Columbia, Md.

Two local planning directors, Arlan Colton of Pima County and Sarah More of Sahuarita, agree that some of those projects have gone a long way toward meeting such goals, although More said, "It takes a long time for businesses to catch up to people."

An Arizona State University planning professor, Joochul Kim, said, however, that creating a mostly self-contained community from scratch has never been done on a large scale in this country. While many of the Phoenix-area developments the Waldens would model their project after have done a good job blending retail and housing, none makes it possible for the majority of residents to live and work there, he said.

"We are not a planned society," Kim said. "We cannot dictate where employers will go."

$$1 \text{ ac-ft} = 325,851 \text{ gal.}, \text{ so } 28,000 \text{ ac-ft} = 9,123,828,000 \text{ gal.}$$

plan was required

$$9,123,828,000 \text{ gal.} \div 150,000 \text{ trees} = 60,825 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{yr}$$

Talk about subdivisions replacing pecan trees is nothing new.

The company announced back in 1980 that it would someday replace the pecan groves with houses. This will be the third or fourth plan FICO has submitted to local authorities, and this one was required by an agreement to get the property annexed into Sahuarita a decade ago.

But one factor is different today: Sahuarita's rapid growth, which was slowed only by the current economic slump. Just shy of 25,000 people live there today, compared with about 4,600 in 2002. The 14-mile-long, 7,000-acre pecan groves, where 150,000 trees tower up to 48 feet high, lie in an area that planners have long designated for growth.

The Waldens say they can't speculate on when homes might rise on the land. But history has shown that as growth occurs, farming can be seen as an incompatible land use with residences, they said.

Dick Walden and his dad had a cattle feedlot across from what is now the La Posada development in Green Valley, Nan recalled. "Green Valley was growing, and they closed down the feedlot in 1976 because it was not compatible.

"The dilemma of farming is that you move machinery across highways, and they can bring noise and dust. People love agriculture, having things to eat, but they don't always love what goes along with it," Nan said.

They say they hope to get public consensus at the upcoming meetings about the plan's details. They are looking at the Santa Cruz as a place for public amenities: an extension of the Anza Trail as well as other hiking and bicycle trails.

"You can either plan for growth or it happens anyway, Nan Walden said. "If we want to look like Phoenix, we can go ahead and not plan."

Favorable reaction

$$60,825 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{yr} \div 365 \text{ days/yr} = 167 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{day}$$

The immediate reaction to the Waldens' announcement from local residents and environmentalists was generally more favorable than the norm for a large development plan.

Robert Robuck lives east of the pecan groves off Santa Rita Road, and bought his property because he likes looking at the trees.

$$\text{assuming } \frac{1}{3} \text{ yr} = \text{growing season,}$$

"But I do believe that homes do use less water than the pecans. It would be a welcome addition to Sahuarita," Robuck said.

$$167 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{day} \times 3 = 500 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{day}$$

A neighbor, Eric Barr, said removing the pecan groves would take away a mosquito problem, caused by flood irrigation that leaves stagnant water pools.

$$\text{assuming irrigation every other day,}$$

"It's like a tropical jungle," said Barr, who lives about 300 feet from the groves.

$$500 \text{ gal.} \times 2 = 1,000 \text{ gal. per tree}\cdot\text{irrigation}$$

West of the groves in Green Valley, Sheila Bellantoni has an "absolutely stunning, beautiful view" of the trees and the Santa Rita Mountains from her home along the Torres Blancas golf course.

"You'd hate to have that interrupted, but at the same time, I can't tell them they can't do what they want to with their property," she said.

Joe Roth, president of the homeowners association for the DeAnza Links development in Green Valley, said he hopes that only a small portion of the pecan trees are developed because of their beauty. But he likes the idea of more retail development, because, "It's pretty sparse out here."

Said Carolyn Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection: "Even hearing that someone wants to do restoration on the Santa Cruz River right out of the gate is very encouraging."

Questions on sustainability

But Hugh Holub, a Tubac attorney, said many questions need answering to determine if the project would be truly sustainable. Two years ago, Holub represented the owners of Las Mesas, a proposed Tubac-area project of 2,600 homes that the Waldens spoke out against at a public hearing before the Santa Cruz County Board of Supervisors.

Las Mesas and a larger companion project, Sopori Ranch, were touted by their developers as sustainable because they planned to have open space and retail stores, would not use potable water on landscaping and used high-density housing to make it economical for them to pay for a sewage plant, roads and bridges. But opponents argued that the developments were too far from existing cities and would destroy the Tubac area's semi-rural character and its wildlife habitat, and killed them in a referendum vote.

Speaking of FICO, Holub said a number of questions need to be answered, including who will pay for highway improvements, expanded sewage treatment capacity and perhaps new power lines and substations needed to support such a large project.

There would be many details to work out, but Nan Walden said the company's history demonstrates a commitment to paying its fair share.

FICO has donated land to the Sahuarita School District for a new high school and is reserving an adjacent middle school site in the same location, she said. Also, the company has donated land for several churches and set aside land for a future hospital site, she said. More than 40 years ago, Keith Walden made a bargain sale to the entity that built the La Posada retirement community when Green Valley was just getting started, Nan recalled.

"He thought a quality retirement community run by a nonprofit would be good for the community, and therefore good for FICO," Nan Walden said.

DID YOU KNOW

Farmers Investment Co. has grown pecans in the Sahuarita area since 1965. It moved its headquarters from Ventura County, Calif., back in 1949. It planted cotton, milo, wheat and barley there until it started the pecan business. The company planted 7,000 acres of pecans by 1969 but today has 4,500 acres of pecan groves - the rest is unplanted. The company also grows pecans on 1,400 acres in the San Simon area near the New Mexico border.

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