

Arizona Daily Star

## Pecan-grove owners show plans for big development

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Owners of the pecan groves south of Tucson are planning what could be the largest development by far in Sahuarita, a Tucson suburb that until the real estate market collapsed was one of the country's fastest-growing communities.

Farmers Investment Co. officials unveiled preliminary plans this week for 16,500 to 19,000 homes on 6,000 acres straddling 12 miles of the Santa Cruz River. The centerpiece is a long-term plan to return water, through effluent, to the river environment.

The company's presentation of full-color slides shows schools, parks, maps of neighborhood and community villages and tree-lined trails.

The Walden family that owns the groves has discussed the possibility of developing some or all of them for 30 years but this is the first time it offered detailed, if still unfinished, development plans.

Farmers Investment officials say, however, that their project would have a lower overall housing density -barely three homes per acre - than most other major developments in the area. Their project's amenities include a river park, open space, a public transit corridor, and still-undefined promises of help for schools.

Farmers Investment officials don't expect any development for at least three to five years. They predict the project will take up to 40 years to finish and say they hope to keep as many of the profitable pecan orchards around as long as possible.

The plans for Sahuarita Farms drew a lot of public support and little criticism at three public meetings this week, which drew about 120 people total.

But the proposal comes with questions that probably won't get answered until the company presents a more detailed plan to Sahuarita town officials early in 2011.

Some questions are how much taxpayers and developers would pay for improvements such as a Santa Cruz River Greenway and for upgrades to the area's road network to support the development's traffic.

"The reality is that any public investment will have to be scrutinized very carefully to make sure it is worth it," Sahuarita Town Manager Jim Stahle said Friday. "They have come to us and shown us stuff ... I didn't see anything that would be an absolute deal breaker for us. From what I've seen so far there are good things that could come from this and there may be areas where we disagree."

Stahle added that "it's a bit of a shocker" to see a development plan for so many homes during the current construction-industry bust.

Brice Elliott, a five-year Sahuarita resident, told a gathering Tuesday at Sahuarita High School that he "can breathe a little sigh of relief" about the plans. He said he thought the developers would propose twice as many homes, and he was pleased to see a wide diversity of housing densities, which range from four-acre lots in rural areas to 20 homes per acre in urbanized areas.

"Our big fear is that we will turn out to be 150,000 people here, which is a little scary," said Elliott. Sahuarita officials project the town of 25,000 people today will reach 31,000 by 2016 and 45,000 by 2025.

At the public meetings, Farmers Investment executives Dick and Nan Walden and their consultants said their project will center on enhancing the now-largely barren riverfront with trails, more vegetation, some flood control work and possibly putting treated sewage effluent in ponds alongside the river or maybe even in the river. One slide showed horseback riders crossing a river full of water, although planners said it's uncertain what the chances are for that.

"The river is what makes this property special. It's what we are excited about," said Mark Reddie, a team leader for LVA Urban Design Studio, a Tempe-based planning firm working for Farmers Investment. "We have an opportunity here to build 12 to 20 miles of open space and trails continuously, accessible to everyone."

Another planner on the project, Frank Thomson, told the crowd that 15 years ago he would have predicted you would never see any water in the river. But in the last two or three years, various water providers and Farmers Investment have come up with a plan for a pipeline to extend Central Arizona Project water from its endpoint at Pima Mine Road to the Farmers Investment property for recharge. "There is a very likely possibility that recharged water using CAP can be part of this riverine environment," Thomson said.

Farmers Investment is exploring a broad range of financing alternatives for the river project, including private contributions and local, state and federal government sources, the company said.

Open space includes about 2,100 acres, or 37 percent of the entire project, including 1,000 acres lining the river. A corridor for a future rail line also would be left open. About 1,000 acres in the project would be planned for commercial, office or other nonresidential development that would bring jobs, planners said.

The project also would widen the river to up to 1,500 feet and beyond so it could hold more floodwater. There would be a 40-acre park, a 20- to 40-acre park and several neighborhood parks covering two to 10 acres. In all, the developers promise that no one in the development will live more than a quarter-mile from at least a pocket park of up to two acres.

But the project would add to the traffic load on a variety of local roads, Sahuarita's Stahle said. That includes Pima Mine and Sahuarita roads and major north-south roads besides Interstate 19, said Stahle, adding, "Our general philosophy is that the development pays for its impact, but there undoubtedly may be some cost sharing with government."

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