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FICO will add homes, preserve open space

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By Philip Franchine, Sahuarita Sun

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Farmers Investment Co., whose property covers one-third of Sahuarita, has released a plan to add nearly 20,000 homes to the town over the next 50 years.

The Sahuarita Farms Land/River Master Plan, which FICO owners Dick and Nan Walden introduced to the public in during three presentations last week, seeks to turn the Santa Cruz River into a 12-mile long greenway that would include trails, revegetated river banks and other open space. The Waldens expect to formally submit the plan to the town of Sahuarita in the first quarter of 2011 and are seeking public comment in the meantime.

While nothing beyond a three-mile trail segment and trail head is expected to be built in the next five years, the ambitious river plan eventually could be part of a 20-mile link in the Anza Trail, including Canoa Ranch and other segments, and might spur commercial and recreational development around Sahuarita Road as far east as Nogales Highway. It hinges on construction work that would tame the river's tendency during heavy rains to become a source of destructive sheet flooding by widening the channel, which is intended to reduce the flood plain and bring development closer to the river.

Many questions remain about the river work, including who will pay. The Waldens say they are seeking partners for that project.

Still growing pecans

FICO owns 5,700 acres in Sahuarita, including about 4,500 acres of pecan groves. Much of the pecan groves will remain under cultivation for years, the Waldens said in the public meetings, as the pecan trees are profitable and there is no immediate demand for thousands of homes.

The plan sets as a target 16,500 homes, or fewer than 3 homes per acre, and for flexibility sake would allow a maximum of 19,000 homes, or 3.3 homes per acre. Both figures are below the 3.8 homes per acre in the town's other master planned communities, Rancho Sahuarita, Quail Creek and Madera Highlands, Mark Reddie of LVA Urban Design Studio of Tempe told audiences.

There would be 1,000 acres of open space along the river and another 1,000 acres of open space in other places, including 50 miles of trails and parks within one quarter mile of every home.

The plan envisions some pecan groves between Nogales Highway and the river even as the rest of the land is developed, said Nan Walden, who is the vice president and legal counsel for FICO.

The plan also calls for 600 acres for employment uses, including light industrial along the railroad tracks near Pima Mine Road, and office parks near Walden Grove High School, as well as 400 acres for commercial along Sahuarita Road and Nogales Highway.

The employment aspect won praise from Town Planning and building Director Sarah More, who noted that the town's other three master planned communities do not include significant employment land uses.

In terms of the timing of development, the Waldens said it will depend on market forces and the needs of the community, but it is unlikely any buildings would go up in less than five years. Building would start where infrastructure exists, basically in the employment areas; along the east side of La Villita Road near Sahuarita Road, and in the commercial area at Calle Valle Verde and Nogales Highway.

Meanwhile, in the next two to three years, FICO hopes to donate land for an Anza Trail and River Park trailhead, including a parking lot, north of Sahuarita Road on the west side of the river.

One reason for creating this plan now, planners said, is that Dick Walden gets requests almost weekly from churches and others seeking to buy land for commercial uses, and he wants a larger plan in place to guide decisions in smaller parcels. In fact, when the Waldens decided to donate land to the Sahuarita Unified School District for the new high school, they wished they had a land-use plan in place, Reddie said.

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