

Green Valley News

FICO development plan moves ahead

By Kitty Bottemiller

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The next step in developing nearly 300 acres of Green Valley pecan groves will come Wednesday when the Pima County Planning and Zoning Commission reviews a proposal by Farmers Investment Co.

The meeting is set for 9 a.m. in the basement Room C of the County/City Public Works Building, 201 N. Stone Ave., Tucson, and is open to the public.

FICO is requesting a county Comprehensive Plan Amendment for a 287-acre parcel south of La Posada in the Santa Cruz River bed. The amendment would allow more intense zoning that would permit development of the land, plus flood-control measures, as FICO retires its groves on part of its 1,000-acre Continental Farms property over the next 50 years. The plan is posted online at the Pima County web site www.pimaxpress.com/planning/ and can be accessed by clicking on the heading to the related agenda item.

FICO received the nod on its plan Feb. 2 from Green Valley Council's Planning and Architecture Committee, which reviews proposals in terms of the area's public interest and appearance and offers recommendations.

"I think it's important to manage the river in a natural way," committee chair Bill O'Malley said. "It (proposal) actually improves the river bed in a way nature couldn't and is not like the channeling that's been done in Tucson."

Wednesday's request involves upgrading about 250 acres from Resource Transition — a low-density designation — to Community Activity Center or Medium Intensity Urban, and 37 more acres to Medium High Intensity Urban or Neighborhood Activity Center from lower-density designations. It is not expected to draw opposition, said lead project planner Mark Reddie of LVA Urban Design Studio, as it is consistent with recent planning efforts by the Walden family, who own FICO, and has been featured in a half-dozen open houses in Green Valley. More public meetings are planned, he said.

The request sets the framework for what type of zoning FICO can ask for later, said Jim Veomett, a Pima County senior planner coordinating the proposal. It is part of a sweeping, long-range plan to convert the nine-mile ribbon of farmland from Canoa Ranch on the south to Pima Mine Road on the north into a mixed-community use. Most of the action will be in Sahuarita, but the Continental Farms parcel involves land in Pima County now covered with pecan groves and a few farm structures.

The Waldens were getting requests for property for schools, convenience stores and other uses in piecemeal fashion, said David Steele, of Strategic Issues Management Group, part of the project's planning team. "The river master plan is a way to design the whole stretch."

Reddie calls the Wednesday request "an early stage in an overall process" required before more-specific development can occur. First comes assigning land use, and if that is approved, then a detailed plan.

The Waldens's vision to develop the acreage as an eye-pleasing expanse of residential, commercial, recreational and natural space has been under discussion for about 30 years. The plan addresses long-term management of the river, its floodplains, ecosystem and recharging capabilities. A team of planners has begun in-depth studies of the acreage and made sketches lending a general idea of how it will look in the decades to come. Current outlines show development similar to the existing Madera Plaza office complex on the southwest corner of Continental and Whitehouse Canyon roads, interspersed with town homes, condos, single-family homes, walking trails and greenbelts, O'Malley said.

Plans include preserving some of the pecan trees throughout the acreage.

"FICO sees the trees as part of the (area's) heritage, but not all would be saved," Steele said. "(The groves) are a successful enterprise right now. This plan will provide a blueprint for the future."

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