New homes could take the place of pecan trees
Tony Davis Arizona Daily Star | Posted: Sunday, June 13, 2010 12:00 am

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 down, rather than wait until another boom rolls in when landowners might quickly decide to cash in on growth.

The pecan groves are protected by a 1972 referendum vote that banned homes or subdivisions within a certain distance of the tops of the trees. The Waldens said they plan to "Get ahead of the growth" by preparing a plan now.

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

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

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

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 plan was later expanded to include 80,000 acres of new homes.

The outlook is 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.

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