Western Front — Wickenburg is using growth to fight land war

By Scott Wong, *The Arizona Republic*

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WICKENBURG - Wranglers still plod to downtown saloons on horseback. Women plan for extra time at the market, certain they'll bump into a familiar face. And the community takes up a collection whenever a neighbor falls ill.

For decades, this rustic town of 6,200, once dubbed the "dude ranch capital of the world," dodged any changes that strayed from its equestrian and mining roots.

Today, Wickenburg's leaders say residents will need to embrace growth if its small-town Western heritage is to survive.

In the coming years, officials plan to annex large swaths of desert to the north and south of town. Over the next decade, Wickenburg could expand its boundaries from 17 square miles to 750, based on a new growth plan.

The annexations will clear the way for the construction of thousands of homes. By some estimates, new rooftops could boost the town's population to 35,000 by 2030.

That will attract businesses to town, bolstering Wickenburg's sales tax base and helping to pay for things like more police officers and road improvements.

But more importantly, leaders say, the additions will ward off land-hungry rival municipalities, protect water sources and seal in key transportation corridors for economic development.

"It's either going to be the Town of Wickenburg determining our destiny or an outside influence," says Town Manager Shane Dille.

Wickenburg's growing pains bring into focus the land battle that occurs when metropolitan areas begin to encroach on small, rural communities.

Beginning in the 1960s, Scottsdale started to emerge from its agricultural identity, expanding north to fend off annexation threats from Phoenix. And in recent years, Buckeye has undertaken an aggressive growth campaign, amassing hundreds of square miles of land as development creeps west along Interstate 10.

"It's been the history of growth in Arizona towns. They have annexed land to protect their boundaries and to control their futures," says Rick Heffernon, an analyst with the Morrison Institute for Public Policy at Arizona State University.

Heffernon, who lives north of Payson, specializes in rural issues.

"Now, it (Wickenburg) is just moving out as the growth moves out," he adds. "They don't want Phoenix sprawl at their doorstep."

**Circling the wagons**

Sixty miles northwest of downtown Phoenix, Wickenburg sits in a place where the Sonoran
Desert gives way to rolling hills.

With Buckeye, Surprise and Peoria knocking on its door, the town has begun circling the wagons. It already annexed 1,200 acres last year, and is planning to absorb thousands more to buffer itself from its neighbors.

According to planning maps, Surprise is poised to capture large plots of land along the Route 60 corridor that eventually could be home to hundreds of thousands of new residents. Meanwhile, Buckeye plans to absorb thousands of acres west of the White Tank Mountains, creating what one day could become a city rivaling Phoenix.

Pushing back, Wickenburg is at the beginning stages of annexing 5,900 acres of private land, much of it in Yavapai County, along Highways 93 and 89 northwest of downtown. It's also eyeing 3,200 acres of private and federal land along Route 60 toward Surprise.

Around town, most residents seem resigned to what they view as Wickenburg's fate.

"We are going to grow," Kendra Brown, a hospital manager, says as she peers out the window of the Pony Espresso cafe. "We just have to learn how to cope with it."

But annexation is a daunting prospect for many others who already see new housing developments infringing on the town's vast skylines, desert trails and pastoral charm.

"For most people, this is a horse community, and most of the development is very irresponsible," says business owner Dana Black, who rides three times a week and walks to her downtown shop each morning along trails.

"It's blocking the horse trails that have been here for 50 years."

**Sensitivity to heritage**

Developers, however, say that it's the town's Western heritage, along with the northwest Valley's affordability and growth, that makes Wickenburg such an attractive place to build. At least 17 new residential projects are on the town's radar.

"We are very conscious, as a development community, of the views, waterways and indigenous plants and wildlife," said Roger Wist, marketing director for developer M3 Cos. "There is a high level of sensitivity to that."

This summer, the Prescott developer is planning to break ground on a 2,300-home community on the site of the dude ranch once owned by entertainer Merv Griffin.

Wickenburg Ranch Estates, just over the Yavapai County line, will include an equestrian center, trail network, 18-hole golf course and both custom and production homes. Later phases of the 2,160-acre project could include townhouses and condominiums, Wist said.

Unlike the tightly packed tract subdivisions popping up in Surprise and other West Valley cities, many of Wickenburg's new homes will be built on lots larger than a third of an acre, Mayor Ron Badowski said.

But Badowski, who recently survived a recall battle over his support for a country club housing development, remains convinced that more rooftops are crucial to the town's future.

"What keeps businesses in town and more opening are more housing apps," said Badowski,
a CPA who moved from Chicago 30 years ago.

Money from the real estate industry already has begun to pour into downtown.

M3 recently bought one block of commercial space along Wickenburg Way. And it put $1 million toward the renovation of the former Texas Hotel, now the M3 sales center.

**A slower pace**

Things move slower here.

Spanning several blocks, the downtown district is a cluster of small businesses: saloons, cafes and collectibles shops.

Charlotte’s Web is spelled out on the marquee of the single-screen Saguaro Theater along Wickenburg Way.

A few blocks away, at the smoke-choked, windowless American Legion bar, veterans pull up a stool, sip from their Budweiser cans and chat about the latest happenings around town.

Around the corner, a Johnny Cash song can be faintly heard from inside Dana Black's Western boutique, Casa Ranchera. But the singer’s baritone notes are drowned out every time a big rig rumbles down Tegner Street, part of the U.S. 93 trucking route that links Phoenix to Las Vegas.

That could soon change. The Arizona Department of Transportation is planning to build a temporary bypass that would divert heavy trucks from downtown, which sees nearly 20,000 vehicles a day.

**Tourism No. 1**

In recent years, treatment centers for addiction, trauma and eating disorders have thrived in Wickenburg. But tourism, inspired by the town's Western sensibilities, still remains the No. 1 industry.

In the 1860s, Wickenburg became home to hundreds of gold miners working at the lucrative Vulture Mine.

Decades later, the town reinvented itself into a Western getaway, boasting a dozen dude ranches. Today, just four remain, and some have begun to cater to an ever more sophisticated clientele.

Before setting out on an afternoon trail ride, guests at Rancho de los Caballeros can start their morning with a round of golf or a desert scrub in the ranch-style spa center. Business groups hold retreats at the ranch, often meeting in the wireless-enabled conference center.

Despite those amenities, ranch manager Jeff Deming says he views the 59-year-old family-owned ranch as a microcosm of Wickenburg, where visitors come to escape the luxuries and conveniences of the modern world.

"I still want it to be a small Western town," Deming says as he sees off a group of 10 on their afternoon ride. "I can't attract guests to a guest ranch in a big city."
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