

Arizona's Coolest Growing City

By Teya Vitu

Coolidge embraces its future and present day with a robust business-friendly attitude that has already started to redefine this small city in the heart of Pinal County.

This historic cotton farming community has used the opening years of the 21st century to establish an emerging industrial center. About 1,000 people or about 20 percent of the Coolidge work force are in industry.

Numerous cotton fields have given way to industrial parks and a recent 1,500-home development. Available land is a trump card for Coolidge, which has grown from 6.5 square miles in 2001 to 65 square miles today, with eyes to double that to 125 square miles.

“The last thing I want to see is Coolidge becoming just a bedroom community.” Coolidge City Manager Bob Flatley said.

Coolidge stands out from Pinal County's other cities in education, public transportation and tourism. And a long-term goal in the Pinal County Comprehensive Plan is for Coolidge to become a central employment site for the whole county, Flatley said.

Coolidge has the main campus of Central Arizona College, which is Pinal County's only higher education center; Coolidge has the Cotton Express Public Transit, the county's only public transit system with four bus routes in town and a fifth route starting in July running to Florence and Casa Grande “regional system”; Coolidge is also home to Pinal County's only public national monument with Casa Grande Ruins National Monument, which is seeking to double in size.

None of Coolidge's virtues are apparent driving through Pinal County on Interstate 10, which runs 6 miles from the city boundary. This gives Coolidge an ideal remoteness yet it remains close enough to be within an hour of Phoenix and Tucson and less than 20 minutes from Dillard's department store and assorted big box shopping in Casa Grande.

“Go try to find an airport where you can park seven C-130 and have a 22,000-square-foot facility and not get in anybody's way,” said Travis Grantham, chief operating officer at International Air Response, which has operated out of Coolidge Airport since 2006.

Coolidge is a safe city, where kids still play in front yards and as the city grows it will protect those basic values. The city is primed to become a place to live, work and play, a place where in future years there will be less and less reason to have to make the drive to Phoenix or even Casa Grande.

Coolidge prides itself on a low crime rate and living with a hometown community spirit that can make things happen.

“It's how they go about it,” said Mark Koelzer, owner of the Ace Hardware in Coolidge for nearly seven years. “They try to stay ahead of things. They have annexed land before houses are built. I've done business in several small towns and they generally are backwards. This town does things right.”

Coolidge today: 12,500 residents, an underused airport, 65 square miles, closest freeway 6 miles away, a 40-acre industrial park that is filled and a 500-acre industrial park still in its earliest stages.

Coolidge in 20 to 30 years: Potentially more than 100,000 residents within what is today a 125-square-mile planning area, plans for a freeway or parkway running from Apache Junction to Picacho that would run alongside Coolidge's east edge; another 1,000-acre industrial park, and a possible commercial airport.

Coolidge already has a potent arsenal with Coolidge Airport and Industrial Park No. 1 and Industrial Park No. 2.

Coolidge Municipal Airport started as Coolidge Army Airfield in the early 1940s in support of nearby Williams Field, which later became Williams Air Force Base and today is Phoenix-Mesa Gateway Center. Coolidge Airport served as the training center for T-37 jets at Williams from 1962 to 1992, even though the city has owned the airport since 1959.

The two original military runways remain, which are ideal for International Air Response and its fleet of C-130 transport jets. IAR does flight testing and training for the Department of Defense. Air drops are the primary activity, whether special forces training, trucks and jeeps, or oil disbursement in the BP oil rig catastrophe in the Gulf of Mexico.

"We do all our heavy maintenance and crew changes for seven C-130." Grantham said. "The proximity to metro Phoenix is great. The open ramp parking is great. The runway is great, and they have large capacity fuel farm."

The airport has 1,200 acres and only 50 acres are developed, which leaves plenty of room for the Complete Parachute Solutions Tactical Training Facility to carry off 12,000 parachute jumps a year for U.S. and allied military. CPS has used Coolidge Airport as a military free fall training site for five years.

The isolated location and 5,500- and 4,000-foot runways, twice the width of typical small-town airports, work in CPS's favor, General Manager Jim Cowan said.

"The development direction is toward aviation related business as opposed to flight schools," Cowan said. "Coolidge has gone out of the way to attract businesses that are aviation related and not just flight schools."

Assistant City Manager and Airport Director Jill Dusenberry said potential airport development includes aircraft component manufacturing, services related to parachutes plus a huge opportunity for unmanned aerial aircraft. UAV's are high on the list for the Central Arizona Regional Economic Development Foundation.

UAV companies presently drive their aircraft from Tucson to fly at the nearby Florence National Guard Training Center, which has UAV qualified restricted airspace.

"We've got numerous unmanned aerial vehicle companies interested in operating out of Coolidge Airport," CAREDF CEO Barry Albrecht said. "We're looking at developing a final assembly and test center for UAV and other aerospace industries,"

Coolidge's isolated airport could become the county's aviation focal point in the coming decades. The Pinal County Comprehensive Plan, approved in November 2009, suggests a possible future commercial airport and aviation-based commerce center for a 47-square-mile area near the present-day airport. The plan states the "area around the airport could become a major economic and job center."

"The potential is just phenomenal," Dusenberry said.

In the mean time, Coolidge has devoted the 2000s to building its industrial base. The foundation for this was increasing the city's designated employment generation area from 6 percent to 22 percent of its 125-square-mile planning area.

“We took the message to heart that it doesn’t make sense to build houses if you don’t bring jobs with it,” Coolidge Growth Management Director Alton Bruce said. “Coolidge has developed a reputation in the last decade to make deals work in the best interest of all parties.”

Western Emulsions and TransCanada this year became the first two tenants of Industrial Park No. 2, about 500 acres of land in Coolidge that are owned by the city of Mesa.

Western Emulsions opened a \$20 million asphalt storage and distribution terminal in February 2010 along with a \$3 million rail spur to serve its 37-acre site. The company’s asphalt will be used for road construction and maintenance projects in Pinal County.

TransCanada is building a \$500 million power plant for the Salt River Project that will produce about 575 megawatts of electricity, enough for about 575,000 homes. Power generation is expected to start in 2011.

In the late 1990s, Bright International Corp., a hair care product manufacturer, became the first tenant at Industrial Park No. 1 (Coolidge Industrial Park) on city-owned land adjacent to the wastewater treatment plant. The 40-acre park filled up in the 2000s with tenants such as Felix Construction, a utility construction firm, and Revegetation Services, an erosion control devices company, and a countertop manufacturer awaiting the economic recovery.

Coolidge also has more than 200 acres of industrial land available along the Highway 87/Union Pacific corridor, where about 80 acres are already occupied by Stinger Welding, steel bridge fabrication, and Heritage Environmental Services.

City leaders are staying at the forefront to try to make the city ready to welcome more industry. General plan amendments are in the works as are plans for water and wastewater expansions to make projects happen.

“What steps do we need to take to position ourselves so we can respond?” Bruce said. “What can we put in place right now to respond to proposals we get?”

Coolidge city government gets plaudits for its business-friendly approach to bring companies to town. The city has a one-stop center with all planning and permitting offices and a quick turnaround time to get permits issued. “We are experiencing a substantial increase of interest from the neighboring Phoenix cities looking for that business friendly environment,” Albrecht said.

“They went out of their way to assist us. Assistant City Manager Jill Dusenberry went above and beyond to get things presented to the City Council,” said Jim Cowan, general manager at the Complete Parachute Solution Tactical Training Facility.

Coolidge can get business through the plan review and permitting process in 45 to 60 days if proper zoning is in place. Approval takes a little more time at the airport because of restricted infrastructure, Dusenberry said.

“Being a small town we use quick approvals as a major portion of our incentive programs,” Dusenberry said. “All we have is the ability to sit down at the table and ask ‘what do you need?’ We honestly state what we can do.”

International Air Response values the excellent infrastructure and power grid at Coolidge Airport.

“The city is extremely easy to work with,” Grantham said. “They are very inviting to work with. They understand they are not a sought out for location. They are straightforward, very easy, upfront.”

The Coolidge Chamber of Commerce confirms the city’s pledge to improve Coolidge.

“The business community is embracing new ideas and directions that enhance our business base while protecting our safe and family oriented lifestyle,” said Lynn Parsons, the chamber’s executive director. “We’re open for new ideas that would enhance our city.”

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Teya Vitu has 20+ years daily newspaper experience in Arizona, Nevada and California.
Contact: (520) 296-6163 and teyavitu@hotmail.com