

Arizona Town Going Global

By Teya Vitu

Casa Grande has capitalized on the early years of the 21st century, emulating Phoenix, Tucson, Flagstaff and Yuma as Arizona's next principal region.

For years, Casa Grande has been perceived as merely a spot on the map between Phoenix and Tucson. This is no longer the case as Casa Grande has emerged into a city where shopping, entertainment, industry and medical care are easily accessible.

The Promenade at Casa Grande opened in 2007, providing the community with an attractive site for fashion, entertainment and dining. The Promenade boasts over 1 million square feet of retail space, making it one of the six largest shopping centers in the state, and is home to major retailers such as Dillard's, Kohl's, JC Penney, Sports Authority and Best Buy.

"The City of Casa Grande was one of the best we ever worked with," said Todd Chester, principal at WDP Partners, one of the three partners along with Westcor and the Peterson Group that built The Promenade at Casa Grande. "City Manager Jim Thompson was phenomenal. They hired a third-party outfit to handle the plans for them. They were very pro-development."

The Promenade at Casa Grande also has numerous eateries ranging from Chik-fil-A and In-N-Out Burgers to sit down restaurants such as Olive Garden and Mimi's Cafe. A visit to the 12-screen Harkins Theatre is a sure way to complete a day of shopping and dining. Whether for business or pleasure, the 40-minute drive to the Valley of the Sun is no longer a necessity, but a choice.

Casa Grande balanced its emerging retail market with industry as the Central Arizona Commerce Park developed and international companies such as Monsanto joined the community.

"Casa Grande's strategic location between Phoenix and Tucson is getting international attention from major firms and investors," said Barry Albrecht, CEO of the Central Arizona Regional Economic Development Foundation. "This city is known as the Home of the Sun Corridor and its new developments of industry and retail will connect the two metro areas to create the nation's next Megaregion."

Casa Grande's population grew more than 109 percent over the last decade, making it the largest city in Pinal County, which is the third largest county in the state and was the fastest growing county in the nation in 2008.

Casa Grande's track record over the past 10 years gives the city momentum to build the city-owned Airport Industrial Park with runway access and the privately-owned sector Central Arizona Commerce Park with a pair of Union Pacific mainline tracks running through the park.

The 580 acre Central Arizona Commerce Park has lots available up to 100 acres for heavy industrial, lumber, steel and chemical industries.

A native of England, Jakob Andersen came to Casa Grande in 2005, disenchanted by the penchant of many developers building big boxes in the West Valley of greater Phoenix. Casa Grande made a lot of sense to him.

"I'm surprised nobody did it 10-15 years ago. Casa Grande has not been on the map," Andersen said. "I saw the double (tracks) of Union Pacific Railroad. Then you have the confluence of I-8 and I-10. Casa Grande is the perfect in-between point. You can get to every major city in the Southwest."

ACO Polymer relocated from Chardon, Ohio to the Airport Industrial Park, as a Top 5 ACO facility out of 26 worldwide production facilities. Their 40,000 square-foot North American Headquarters opened in 2007 and manufactures polymer concrete drainage systems for the commercial and residential markets to eliminate surface water. The company expects to grow from 45-50 employees to 75-80 in the next few years.

“The city was very helpful when issues arose,” said Brian Parent, ACO’s Director of Operations. “They are a city that understands that it’s not just houses. They need business. We were able to buy land from the city at a pretty good deal. They helped us with relations with the utility companies. The three of us got together for a win-win for everybody.”

“As we go after new business, every city has similar stuff,” Mayor Bob Jackson said. “What it comes down to is quality of life. It’s provided all of those intangible things new employers look at, that we didn’t have 10 years ago.”

A 15 percent increase in sales tax revenue from the 53-shop Promenade helps fuel the city’s coffers to keep up with growth, projected to eventually reach 1 million people. The 2000s saw the building of new police and fire stations, a new library, and the capacity of the wastewater treatment plant expanded from 2 million to 12 million gallons.

Monsanto Co., a Fortune 500 company, thrives on the agriculture sector in Casa Grande. The company moved its Arizona Cotton Research Center to Casa Grande to occupy a 40,000-square-foot research and development facility in 2010. Nearly all cotton grown in the South originates from seeds grown and cotton strains developed in Casa Grande.

“Breeders send us seeds from North Carolina. People in Nebraska and Georgia, Missouri and Texas are all growing seeds grown in Central Arizona,” said Tim Dabbert, Monsanto’s Site Manager in Casa Grande.

The Frito-Lay plant in Casa Grande converts 500,000 potatoes a day into Lay’s and Ruffles potato chips in the nation’s first food manufacturing site awarded LEED Existing Building Gold Certification from the U.S. Green Building Council.

“As we grow into the next generation, we have to set our sights a little higher,” Jackson said. “I think that the market is international. The world is getting smaller. The international influence will make a difference in what we will become.”

In just the past two years, Casa Grande has turned into an international soccer haven with Grande Sports World, where 12 of 18 Major League Soccer teams conduct training. The Canadian Olympic team trains at Grande Sports World as do two New Zealand groups and an under-17 team from Rwanda.

“In fall, the youth of the community get to play on the fields that professional athletes play on,” said City Manager Jim Thompson. “They offer clinics to our youths. Not many places have somebody who coaches a professional team coaching our kids for free.”

“We partner with people for the betterment of the community,” Thompson said, “If you come to us and you are prepared, we will work very hard to partner with you. We’re in the middle of the future of the Sun Corridor, the No. 1 growing area in the country. We’re diverse. We welcome all opportunities.”

Casa Grande partnered with Francisco Grande Hotel & Golf Resort to make Grande Sports World a reality. The city invested \$20 million to buy the land from Francisco Grande and construct eight international-caliber soccer fields and a state of the

art training facility that houses therapy, meeting, and locker rooms that can accommodate four teams with 70 athletes each. In turn, the city leases Grande Sports World back to the resort.

Ritchie Bros., a Canadian-based industrial auction company, is relocating to Casa Grande from its undersized 42-acre property in Phoenix. The Casa Grande site has 140 acres with 100 acres being developed into a display yard.

“Why we landed in Casa Grande is it’s a very strategic location with Interstate 8 and Interstate 10,” said Scott Lennon, real estate manager for North America at Ritchie Bros., “ We have another site in Perris, Calif., 375 miles away, 410 miles away in Las Vegas, and 500 miles away in Albuquerque.”

Ritchie Bros. auctions backhoes, bulldozers and bobcats in the construction, transportation, agricultural, mining, mineral, oil and gas industries. The company plans to start construction in summer 2012 and open in summer 2013 with 20 to 25 full-time employees that will swell to 75 during auction weeks.

“It’s going to be one of our Top 10 producing sites,” said Lennon, adding that 1,000 to 2,000 people show up for these auctions. “People come from all over the country and world for these auctions. It’s not just a Friday night auction. A lot of our Mexican customers will come and bid and often be successful. We’re also building the Tucson market. The Casa Grande location really allows us to build a Tucson market.”

As the city of Casa Grande capitalized on opportunities, population soared and the need arose for improved emergency medical care and bigger, better public facilities. Casa Grande Regional Medical Center was the first hospital in Arizona, and one of only 191 nationwide, to reach Stage 6 recognition – the second highest – for its electronic medical record system.

Casa Grande has been home to generations of families. It is a community built for young and old and will continue to expand for years to come.

“I love the small community,” Councilmember Steve Miller said. “I like knowing the people. It just has a sense of community. People get involved in the schools. People get more involved in a personal basis than in a big city. It hasn’t lost the small town feel.”

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Teya Vitu is a freelance writer with 20-plus years of daily newspaper experience in Arizona, Nevada and California.