

High Country News

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Wildcat subdivisions fuel fight over sprawl

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Arizona argues over how to rein in runaway development

PICTURE ROCKS, Ariz.- Washboards pass for roads here. Handmade street signs are tacked to utility poles and saguaro cacti. Lines of mailboxes stand in front of unevenly spaced mobile homes.

Those who live here love walks in the desert and riding horseback. People are drawn by low-key living, by the lack of neon signs, strip malls and street lights, and by the price. It takes \$25,000 to buy an acre lot, plus \$90,000 for a new mobile home.

That compares to \$35,000 to \$45,000 for an acre and \$159,000 for an average new home in the Tucson urban area.

But Picture Rocks, about 25 miles northwest of downtown Tucson, is no Green Acres. Its 10,000 residents often complain about the crummy roads, the poor access to many lots and the growing traffic. When vehicles roll down the dusty roads, "it looks like someone opened up a 100-mile-an-hour wind tunnel," says Fred Metz, a Picture Rocks resident since 1996.

Kathy Stewart, a fire marshal for the Picture Rocks fire district, says the mess shouldn't be such a surprise. "If it is less expensive to buy, there's probably a reason," she says. "You pay for it one way or another, and you don't realize it."

Picture Rocks is typical of what Arizona officials call "wildcat subdivisions," where landowners split and sell lots for new homes without having to pave streets, provide access to property, install curbs and gutters, build sewer lines or design storm drains.

Wildcat subdivision development, which bedevils county officials as much as it does environmentalists, is one of many issues fueling a statewide debate over growth that will last at least until November.

Developers run wild

Since 1994, wildcat subdivisions have proliferated all over Arizona, particularly in Pima County, surrounding Tucson. Studies have found that, of a total of about 5,000 building permits issued in unincorporated areas of Pima County, about 40 percent - or 1,525 to 2,300 homes annually - have occurred in wildcat subdivisions.

The county released a study in February which found that sheriff's department services for wildcat subdivisions cost tens of thousands of dollars more per square mile than the subdivisions bring to the county in tax revenue. Six conventional urban subdivisions, by contrast, generate more in tax revenue than it costs the county to answer sheriff's calls. If the county paved dirt roads and installed storm drains for wildcat lots, which it has until now refused to do, it would cost taxpayers \$35 million to \$55 million a year, according to the study.

"Wildcat subdivisions have terrible consequences for rational urban planners," said Pima County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, who has crusaded against them for years. "They transfer the costs of purchasing and developing property. In the short run, buyers pay less, but in the long run, the community will pay more."

Opponents of stricter regulations on development contend that county governments are partly to blame for the spread of wildcatting. By zoning out most higher-density development in rural areas, the county has concentrated development in pockets such as Picture Rocks, says Bill Arnold, a veteran realtor and private-property rights activist.

Arnold argues that requiring developers to tell potential home buyers about the lack of services in wildcat subdivisions is the best way to curb abuses. He and many residents contend that the county should loosen its road standards for rural areas, to make paving dirt roads cheaper. If the county cracks down on lot-splitting, that will simply force landowners to sell larger lots, causing development to spread farther into the desert, he says.

"Real problems need real solutions," says Arnold. "Giving county government authority to say no for lot splits doesn't solve the problem."

Dueling solutions to sprawl

Meanwhile, on the state level, lawmakers and political organizers are fighting over how best to curb Arizona's runaway sprawl.

In February, the state's conservative, Republican-controlled Legislature overwhelmingly passed a package of reform measures aimed at giving state and local governments a handle on growth.

If voters approve the package next November, it would allow preservation of 270,000 acres of state-owned trust land that otherwise would be sold for development. It would give county governments limited power to control wildcat subdivisions. Cities could establish urban service boundaries beyond which they wouldn't extend new roads and water lines. Developers would have to pay an undefined "fair share" of the costs of new roads, parks, fire stations and other services needed to serve new developments.

Environmentalists dub the state's "Growing Smarter" plan "Growing Dumber." Led by the Sierra Club, they have countered with a much more aggressive ballot initiative that will go head-to-head with the state's plan in the fall election.

The environmentalists' initiative would require Oregon-style urban-growth boundaries in every major city and county and require developers to pay the full cost of bringing infrastructure to new projects.

It would also restore county powers over wildcat subdivisions. Until those powers were reduced in 1994, anyone who split a large lot into four or more smaller lots had to follow the same rules for installing street paving and storm drainage as any major developer does. That year, the Legislature, under pressure from farming and other rural interest groups, passed a bill allowing wildcat subdividers to split lots up to five times and still escape the subdivision requirements.

Sierra Club lobbyist Sandy Bahr says she is optimistic about the initiative's prospects, despite the loss of the drive's chairman, former state attorney general Grant Woods, who defected to the Growing Smarter camp as the legislation was passing. The group now has 110,000 signatures, 10,000 more than necessary to get the proposal on the ballot. It hopes to turn in about 150,000 in July. Opinion polls have repeatedly shown the initiative passing easily, although none have been released since "Growing Smarter" passed the Legislature.

"We think it's real clear that the public supports growth management," says Bahr, "and we don't think the Legislature will be able to convince people that they've done enough."

Jack Pfister, a retired utility executive who chaired the state Growing Smarter commission, declined to predict the outcome. One thing is for sure, he says: It will be a "very bruising campaign on both sides."

The author reports for the *Arizona Daily Star* in Tucson.

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