

SOUTHWEST VALLEY

Thousands of apartments, rentals on tap for Laveen as residents demand sustainable growth

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The Laveen community in southwest Phoenix has seen thousands of residential rooftops under construction for years, with houses replacing farms in the once agricultural area of the city.

But as the area has grown, the rapid development of housing has eaten up some of the land that could have been used for retail amenities and employment, some residents worry.

Three projects that are under construction or planned are expected to bring thousands of apartments and rental homes, a movie theater and unique restaurants to the area, which some residents said has been leapfrogged as other areas of the Valley have matured.

“If you look at other parts of the Valley, it’s the exact same thing,” Jason Morris, partner at Withey Morris and zoning attorney for one of the projects, said. “First it was the residential and then they started to get a lot more of the national brands, then the local brands.”

Larger plans have languished

The Matrix at Dobbins is planned on 40 acres that used to be a dairy farm.

The proposed development near 59th Avenue and Dobbins Road was expected to be part of a larger, master-planned area, called Laveen Town Center in the early 2000s, but the Great Recession halted those plans and some of the individual landowners developed their properties on their own.

The land surrounding the project site is mostly vacant, but single-family houses are expected, including on the north and east of the site.

“The larger case tried to integrate a lot of different uses in the area,” said Morris, the zoning attorney representing Matrix, said. “This one piece can’t bring all of the uses, but it can be what it was originally intended for, and it can be a gathering space.”

Most of the property, about 31 acres, is planned for two types of rental housing:

A 10-acre piece is slated for a 207-unit apartment complex.

The other would include 197 units of single-family rental housing with four attached units per building, each with a garage, he said. The buildings would be in clusters with two buildings each, totaling eight units, with a shared courtyard area, according to documents submitted to the city.

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Residents want more employment, commercial

The commercial and retail portions of the Matrix are planned at the corner of 59th Avenue and Dobbins Road, on a parcel totaling about 8 acres.

The area, called the “town square,” is expected to include four restaurants and three retail shops, although no tenants have been announced yet. The restaurant spaces

are planned to have indoor and outdoor dining with patios. The area also includes a 1.7-acre grassy open space for a water feature, Morris said at a public meeting.

The project has faced some pushback from residents clamoring for more commercial development and more input in the development process.

“There was an opportunity to build something really great here, but now things are being developed piecemeal,” Dan Penton, a Laveen advocate and board member of Laveen Citizens for Responsible Development, said of the Laveen Town Center project.

Penton wants to see a third of the property used for commercial.

Some local employment opportunities and local amenities like a brewery or some Arizona-based restaurants would be ideal for the site, he said.

“We do have a need for housing, but we are getting very little of anything that is affordable,” Penton said. “Without employment in the area, I don’t know how they plan to get tenants who can afford to live there.”

There are about 7,500 housing units planned or permitted in all of Laveen by various developers, Penton said.

The growth of housing, both for sale and for rent in Laveen has left the area feeling like it has gotten a lot of the same type of product, but other areas of the Valley grew the same way, Morris said.

Some Laveen residents are concerned that land previously zoned for commercial projects is getting rezoned for residential, Penton said, adding that the housing units already in the planning pipeline will bring some of the housing the area needs.

However, it also is important for the neighborhood to maintain true to its rural roots, Penton said, and residents have had to adjust to the changing landscape.

“Laveen had been known as very anti-development, and anti-high density,” Penton said. “I used to be of that mindset, but considering the environment, we have to change that mindset and accept some of the higher density. If we had been that way in the past, a lot of the concern about urban sprawl might have been prevented.”

Instead, Penton said, he has taken to advocating for sustainable development, and making sure the community has input into what is being built so that it will suit their needs.

The Matrix project will go back before the Laveen Village Planning Committee on Aug. 8, and if it is eventually approved by the Phoenix City Council, construction could start in the second half of next year, Morris said.

Another development called Laveen Park Place is providing for some of the residents' demand for more commercial.

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Retail, movie theater and housing on tap

Phoenix-based developer Kitchell opened a Sprouts Farmers Market, TJ Maxx, Michael's and several other retailers in 2019 at Laveen Park Place, near 59th Avenue and Baseline Road, north of the Matrix project. And the next phase is now under construction.

Denny's is leasing the corner pad at Baseline and the freeway, and one sit-down restaurant and one drive-thru are planned on two other pads.

Harkins Theatres bought eight acres of land in the development in 2021 for \$3 million, and recently submitted site work drawings to the city, Rob Schramm, president of Kitchell, said. Once Kitchell receives the necessary permits, it will begin construction on the area around Harkins this year, readying the site for Harkins to construct its building.

But even the Laveen Park Place project now has a residential component.

Laveen Park Place is part of 140 acres of land that Kitchell had owned on both sides of the freeway. As the project has progressed, it has sold several parcels, including one on the west side of the freeway to Banner Health.

Two apartment builders have bought land from Kitchell within the Laveen Park Place area, east of the freeway, which Schramm said will make the area more walkable and add customers for the incoming retail.

In early July, developer D.R. Horton bought 10 acres from Kitchell for \$5.9 million, according to real estate database Vizzda. The company plans to develop 130 single-family rentals, Schramm said.

Directly south of D.R. Horton's land, Hawkins Cos. bought 23 acres for \$10.5 million and plans to develop a 536-unit apartment complex, totaling 16 buildings ranging in height from two to four stories with units ranging from one to three bedrooms.

"We are extremely excited about Harkins and the entire development," Schramm said. "The community has been phenomenal to the tenants already. Laveen is a hidden gem, the retailers are loving it."

The second phase of the retail development will double the amount of space in the retail portion, Schramm said, bringing the total to about 230,000 square feet.

Freeway sparked interest

Kitchell still owns another 46 acres of land on the west side of Loop 202, south of the land Banner bought. Schramm said the company doesn't have any announcements of plans yet but is excited about it.

The construction of the freeway, completed in 2019, sparked Kitchell and the other developers to begin movement on the sites, Schramm said.

“We’ve owned the land for 15 years, and we were waiting for the freeway to come,” he said. “Once the freeway was announced and under construction, that was when we decided to move forward.”

On the northern side of Baseline, directly north of Laveen Park Place, Barclay Group received preliminary site plan approval in June for Laveen Spectrum, a 72-acre project that plans to include retail, a hotel, medical offices, self-storage, office, apartments, single-family rental housing and single-family homes.

The project is divided into phases, with the most retail and commercial uses planned on the southern portion of the site, along Baseline, and the housing portions planned for the northern portion.

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