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Population likely to pass Pima's in 20 to 30 years

4 factors boost future of 6th-fastest-growing county in the nation

By Tony Davis

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Pinal County, now the United States' sixth-fastest-growing county, will likely surpass Pima County's population in 20 to 30 years, officials said Wednesday.

A heftier supply of developable land, lower housing prices, a brighter water picture and looser development rules are likely to boost Pinal over Pima, officials in the two counties said.

Pinal, whose growth includes spillover from Tucson and Phoenix, grew by nearly 13 percent in the year ending last July 1. Its population is up more than 50 percent since 2000.

Pinal still has a long way to go. It has about 300,000 people while Pima has more than 1 million, according to state and local estimates.

But Pinal could catch up by 2025, forecasters said. Pima County will have about 1.48 million people, while Pinal will have at least 750,000 and as many as 1.4 million by then.

Such an increase isn't inconceivable given the rapid buildup of homes approved for future construction there, local planners say. Pinal County has approved 830,000 new homes, and work has begun on 157,000.

"I think they can pass Pima County and it won't take 25 years," said Marshall Vest, an economist at the University of Arizona's Eller School of Management.

In Maricopa County, the East Valley is filling up, and growth to the east can only occur in Pinal County. It is now occurring from Casa Grande to Coolidge, and in Eloy and Florence, said Arlan Colton, Pima County's planning director.

Some Pinal County residents are well aware of the growth pressures.

Geneie Adams, a Realtor who lives in SaddleBrooke, just north of the Pima-Pinal county line, said she accepts the growth as "part of today's society" and believes it does no good to fuss about it.

She's happy, in fact, that Vistoso Community Church, where her husband, Dale, is pastor, has added 50 percent more members since the couple moved here from Houston in 2001.

But she's less thrilled at the blading for development south of SaddleBrooke. "They've really destroyed the beautiful desert," she said.

Donald Smith, a five-year SaddleBrooke resident, said he doesn't mind the growth overall, but he is concerned about a growing traffic bottleneck on North Oracle Road. At rush hours it forces people to drive 10 or 15 mph below the area's 55 mph speed limit. With the growth projected in the next five years it's going to be unbelievable, he said.

Growth is good news for the Red Rock Village development, which has sold about 200 homes since January at its site west of Interstate 10 in southern Pinal County. Pulte Home Corp. said it expects to sell all 450 homes of its first phase by early 2008, and to build all 3,964 homes within 10 years.

A lot of the interest stems from the project's affordable prices: in the "low \$160s" for a 1,254-square-foot

home and in the \$290,000 range for a 4,045-square-foot home, said Jacque Petroulakis, director of public affairs for Pulte in Arizona.

Pinal County has lower home prices such as these and is a bigger draw in part because it has far more developable land than Pima County, authorities say.

Pinal has 3,259 square miles of developable state and private land. About 85 to 90 percent is vacant. Pima, while significantly bigger than Pinal, has less buildable land because so much is owned by tribes and the federal government, officials said.

Pinal's water picture is also more attractive than Pima County's, Colton said. Homeowners and farms have pumped down the water tables in both counties. But Pinal has a much larger agricultural base, meaning it can convert on a larger scale to subdivisions that use much less water than farms.

Finally, Pinal's regulations are more lax than Pima's.

Pinal didn't approve impact fees for new homes until late 2006; Pima adopted them in 1996.

Pinal planners are working on an open-space plan and on preserving a stretch of the San Pedro River — nearly nine years after Pima started work on its Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

Unlike Pima, Pinal has no rules regulating hillside or wash development, or requiring developers to set aside native plants, although slopes more than 15 percent steep are generally protected when individual projects are approved.

"I don't know of any counties more restrictive than Pima County," said Jerry Stabley, Pinal's deputy planning director.

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