

“Plan B” – a multi-generational Sun City – *Signs of the Past by Ed Allen*

Sun City’s opening on January 1, 1960 was a smashing success with the sale of 237 houses! By yearend, 1300 had been bought by enthusiastic retirees! Considering that DEVCO had hoped for 1700 sales in the first three years, the Webb Corp was euphoric and began to lay plans for two new “Sun Cities” in California and one in Florida. But then, sales began to slip.

By 1965, sales were less than a third of 1960, and the trend was discouraging. As a result, a “Plan B” had been developed. Phase 1, south of Grand Ave, would continue to be developed as a senior community. The area north of Grand, however, would be a multi-generational community.

First to be developed would be the area immediately north of Grand Ave. In order to attract families to the area, jobs would need to be provided, and the map shows two industrial areas – one north of Grand and east of 99th; the second, north of Thunderbird, east of 99th. The railroad spur that DEVCO had added to bring in raw material would serve the new businesses in these industrial parks.

The largest portion is in orange marked as “commercial.” It provides space for schools, churches, golf, shopping, and future residential development.

There were two other, somewhat smaller, alternative plans. The first involved interest from Roy Rogers and Dale Evans in 1961 to buy a large parcel of undeveloped Sun City Land. Their idea was to develop a Western theme park called “Frontierland.” Unfortunately, nothing more appears in historical records to explain why it was never developed.

The second plan involved the Atomic Energy Commission and a national search for the location of a massive, underground proton accelerator also called a super-collider. The AEC required a minimum of 3,000 acres, which the Webb Corp. had available north of Grand. According to John Meeker’s notes, the Sun City location was a finalist, but the project was awarded to a location near Chicago and the University of Chicago.

Now for the good news! Sales did turn around and Sun City took off! Up until 1965, John Meeker had been mainly concerned with the design and planning for housing, rec centers, golf courses and commercial buildings. He went to Webb with a bold idea of how to turn sales around. Webb liked his ideas and made him president of DEVCO with authority to do what was needed.

Meeker’s plan was as brilliant as it was unconventional! It was common at that time for a builder to feel his job was done when the house was completed and sold. He’d run more advertising to draw in new prospects ... then build more homes ... and repeat the cycle over and over. Meeker, however, realized they were selling a new lifestyle for retirees, and they needed help adjusting to it. He believed in community, in involving the residents, and creating a sense of belonging. He believed that if the residents became actively involved, they would become the best sales personnel of all!

He built the Sun Bowl to bring people together to hear the nation’s top entertainers... jump-started club activity with drawings for color TVs... sponsored States Days events, a Watermelon Whingding & Sing, Father’s Day Root Beer Bust and more. And it worked! Residents couldn’t wait to write the people back home and boast about all that was going on! Housing sales increased each year! In the final years, DEVCO was selling more than 3,000 houses a year – and Sun City sold out earlier than expected! Thanks to Meeker, Plans B, C & D were unneeded and relegated to the dustbin of history!

