

SUN CITY WEST

FROM LIZARD ACRES TO A 'NEW SUN RISING IN THE WEST'



Before there was Sun City West, there was Lizard Acres, a cattle ranch operated by the Circle One Livestock Company.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, this land isn't fit for raising anything but lizards," exclaimed an early rancher when he first viewed the desert that would one day become Sun City West.

As it turned out, that parched landscape would soon be home to several successful ranching operations and today the site of Arizona's second largest active-adult retirement community.

When it first opened in 1978, Sun City West was the Del Webb Corporation's second active-adult retirement community to be built in Arizona.

The first, of course, was Sun City, which introduced the world to the concept of active-adult retirement living. Sun City officially opened its doors Jan. 1, 1960. A resounding success, the Webb company sold 237 homes valued at over \$2.5 million during the community's first three days.

By the end of that first year, the Webb company had sold over 1,700 homes in Sun City. The active-adult community concept prompted the company to build similar communities in Florida and California, but Sun City would continue to be Webb's shining star throughout the next two decades.

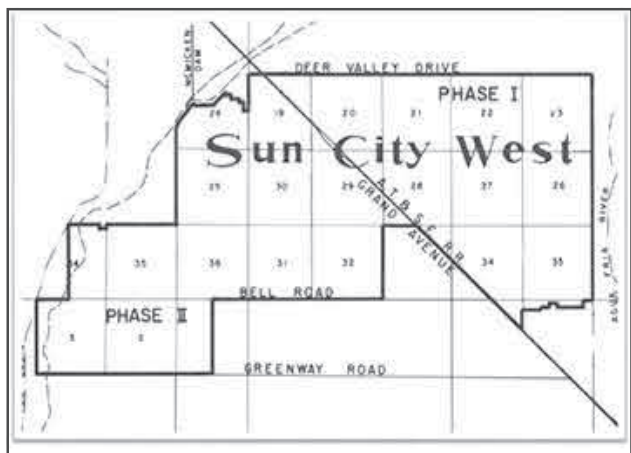
Company officials added to its Northwest Valley land holdings in the early 1970s by purchasing an

additional 13,000 acres of land just a few miles west of Sun City. Rather than expand Sun City westward, the company opted to complete Sun City and create an entirely new retirement community on the other side of the Agua Fria River.

A portion of that land was once the site of the Circle One Livestock Company, one of the southwest's largest cattle operations. Because of that unknown rancher's earlier declaration that the land wasn't fit for anything but lizards, the area where Sun City West now exists was informally known as "Lizard Acres."

In 1975 the Del Webb Development Company launched plans for a new – but totally separate -- retirement community. Its name: Sun City West.

John Meeker Jr., president of the Del E. Webb Development Company at the time, had a grand vision for this new community -- a "new sun rising in the west." Sun City was already known throughout the world for its first-class amenities and recreation, and Mr. Meeker intended Sun City West to be bigger, better -- and grander-- on every level.



Original plans for Sun City West called for a community of over 70,000 that existed on both sides of Grand Avenue. An economic downturn forced the Del Webb Corporation to sell the land south of Grand Avenue. The company would years later re-purchase some of the land to build Sun City Grand.

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Construction of Sun City West began in February 1978, with the community's first residents moving in later that fall.

The original size of the community itself was to dwarf Sun City.

Sun City West's 13,000 acres were to straddle Grand Avenue -- both north and south. Phase 1 would be north of Grand Avenue (Sun City West as it exists today), and Phase 2 would extend south of Grand all the way to Greenway Avenue and southwest to the Beardsley Canal.

Phase 2 would have included all of what is now Sun City Grand, Arizona Traditions and a big chunk of what we have come to know as Surprise. Had the Webb Corporation stuck to its original plans, Sun City West would have had a population of 70,000!

Feb. 15, 1978, marked the groundbreaking for

Sun City West and the first residents moved into their homes in October.

An interesting piece of trivia: There were no model homes built in Sun City West for the very first homes. Sun City West's first 19 model homes were located at 104th Avenue and Wheatridge Drive in Sun City. The base price ranged from \$36,990 to \$70,490. The first Sun City West model homes constructed in Sun City West were opened in December 1978.

A housing components plant built by the Webb company along Bell Road allowed the company to speed up the home-building process by prefabricating components and pre-assembling such items as walls, plumbing fixtures and roof trusses. This innovative process allowed the

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company to complete 21 homes each day in Sun City West!

By July 1979, the new community had over 1,600 homes.

But size alone wasn't enough to satisfy John Meeker's grand vision. He wanted everything bigger and better, and among the amenities intended for the new community:

*** Hillcrest Golf Course, with its 20-acre lake, opened in 1979. At the time, it was considered by many golf enthusiasts one of the three most challenging courses in Arizona. In the 1980s, it would host several LPGA and Senior PGA tournaments.**

*** The outdoor Sun Bowl had proven immensely popular in Sun City, and the new community would be home to the Sundome Center for Performing Arts -- a 7,000-seat indoor, air-conditioned auditorium. When it opened in 1980, it was billed as the largest, single-level amphitheater in the nation and considered by many to be an engineering marvel.**

*** Mr. Meeker was determined Sun City West would have the largest recreational complex of any retirement community in the southwest. That complex -- R.H. Johnson Recreation Center -- when completed in 1979 lived up to its billing. Spread out over 48 acres, the 118,000-square-foot facility would feature a bowling alley, shuffleboard courts, fitness center, social hall, lecture hall, ballroom dance hall and numerous arts and crafts rooms. And those were all indoors! Step outside and one would find tennis courts, an Olympic-size swimming pool, bocce, a walking track and more.**

*** The heart of Sun City West -- the commercial core -- would not only include a grocery store and banks, but it was also intended as the site of a community hospital, cemetery and indoor mall. That's right, an indoor mall! The Valley's largest mall at the time -- MetroCenter -- had just opened in Phoenix and Mr. Meeker had visions of building a similar facility in downtown Sun City West!**

And then the bubble burst. Rising interest rates and an economic downturn in the early 1980s



When it opened in 1980, the Sundome Center for Performing Arts was billed as the largest single-level theater in North America. The facility seated 7,000 patrons in indoors, air-conditioned comfort.

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stifled interest and home sales slowed dramatically. To add to the challenge, the Webb company had expanded over the years and accumulated a large amount of debt.

To gain control over debt, the company was forced to sell a number of its assets – including land in what was to be Phase 2 -- the land south of Grand Avenue.

The air had gone out of the Sun City West balloon. Meeker's grand vision was in serious jeopardy of falling apart before it even had a chance to get off the ground.

The Sundome, Hillcrest Golf Course and the R.H. Johnson Recreation Center survived -- but plans for a downtown hospital, indoor shopping mall and cemetery were scrapped, destined to become footnotes to history. (The Sundome, too, eventually disappeared to make way for a grocery store.)

A smaller Sun City West would survive, and indeed rebound to full strength by the mid-1980s.

Ironically, when a similar recession hit in the 1990s, it was the Webb Company that took full advantage of the financial struggles then suffered by other



The Del Webb Memorial Hospital opened its doors in 1988.

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landowners. In 1992 the company purchased 885 acres north of the community and used that land to expand Sun City West (and later to build Corte Bella).

And in a strange twist of fate, the company would re-purchase much of that land it sold during those tough days back in the 1980s -- land since incorporated into Surprise -- and use it to build Sun City Grand.

(Residents living in Sun City Grand, Arizona Traditions and most of Surprise may not realize that had it not been for a major recession and economic downturn in the early 1980s, they would today be living in Sun City West!)

The community has continued to grow and expand over the years, but has been able to retain the small-town, close-knit community feel that attracted those early pioneers to Sun City West.

In addition to the R.H. Johnson Recreation Center, the community boasts the Fred Kuentz, Beardsley and Palm Ridge recreation centers, with each center providing myriad recreation activities, clubs and facilities for hobby enthusiasts.

As the community grew, so did the need for health care facilities and assisted-care facilities. The Del

Webb Memorial Hospital opened in 1988 and today is a world-class health care facility serving the entire West Valley. Sun City West received its own post office in 1995.

Sun City West remains an unincorporated community whose governance and oversight is handled primarily by Maricopa County working closely with the Recreation Centers of Sun City West and PORA. A continuum of citizen-operated organizations – including the Posse, PRIDES and more – contribute to the continued success of the community.

The community will celebrate its 50th anniversary in 2028. Mr. Meeker may have envisaged Sun City West as a "new sun rising in the west," but it remains a strong, vibrant community where the sun continues to shine brightly on all those who call the community home.

This story was provided by the Sun Cities Area Historical Society, owners of the Del Webb Sun Cities Museum at 10801 W. Oakmont Drive, Sun City. More information on the history of Sun City West can be found in the book, "Sun City West: Silver Celebration," by Edson Allen and available at the museum, or by visiting www.delwebbsuncitiesmuseum.org.

All photos courtesy Del Webb Sun Cities Museum.



The Del E. Webb Sun Cities Museum is open to the public and shares the history of Sun City and Sun City West. The museum is located at 10801 W. Oakmont Drive, Sun City, in the very first of five model homes opened in Sun City. The museum is listed on the National Register of Historic Places.