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Golf drives Bullhead City's real estate boom

By Bill Huffman, For the Tribune

November 23, 2005

Bullhead City, often referred to as the "hottest place in Arizona," is sizzling these days — and it's not even summer!

What's happening on the state's northwest border — a moonlike landscape of barren rocks and little vegetation — almost defies explanation. Believe it or not, the sister city of Laughlin, Nev. — the two are located right across the Colorado River from each other — is exploding. And golf has everything to do with the eruption in population.

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A new golf course community called Laughlin Ranch is fueling the real estate fire. At 12,000 acres, it will some day be the largest golf complex in Arizona, with four golf courses, 45,000 homes and 100,000 people. Currently the area has about 10,000 residents.

By comparison, the state's next-biggest golf course community is Desert Mountain in Scottsdale, with six golf courses, 1,400 homes and 2,800 people spread out over 8,000 acres.

Laughlin Ranch never will have the amenities or high-profile membership of a Desert Mountain. But for the average guy, this is an opportunity to grab a piece of the good life.

It all starts with the awe-inspiring first course at Laughlin Ranch, which was created by Scottsdale architect David Druzisky, whose work includes the Duke at Rancho El Dorado near Maricopa. Add in the new El Rio Country Club in the nearby Mojave Valley, and the 5 million annual visitors to the Laughlin-Bullhead City area are now busy enjoying another game besides blackjack.

According to Terry, a chauffeur from Lucky Cab in Laughlin, "This (real estate) market is hotter than the weather, and it's going to get a lot hotter, especially over in Bullhead City now that they've got Laughlin Ranch. We've always done well in Laughlin from a casino standpoint, but these two new golf courses have just pushed it over the top."

Terry, who drives his cab at night and spends his daylight hours golfing, seemed to know just about everything there is to know about Laughlin-Bullhead City. His only miscue, or so it seemed, was when he warned about the undulating putting surfaces at El Rio.

"Man, those greens really ovulate out there," he said.

Others who have followed the rise since Laughlin Ranch opened its doors in April 2004 were more precise. One of those was Matthew Goodwin, the director of sales at Laughlin Ranch.

"We're betting heavily on the baby boomers from California," Goodwin said. "If we sell 1 percent of 1 percent — one-tenth of a percent — to that group alone, we'll sell out. Or, if we can capture just 1 percent of the casino traffic, we'll also be sold out. Either way, it's a win-win."

Yes, Laughlin Ranch, which is owned by Scottsdale developer David Lords, looks like a better bet than red or black. The first phase of its housing, in which 1,500-square-foot homes sold for \$150,000, was like a gold rush. So along came the second phase, and even though those same entry-level homes were raised to \$250,000, they also "sold like hot cakes," Goodwin said.

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Now in its third phase, those same homes jumped to \$350,000.

Laughlin Ranch, which is being built "village by village," a concept devised by Scottsdale-based Swaback Partners, might be the state's strongest market.

An amazing story, for sure. And further proof that, if you build great golf courses, they will come.

Even to remote locations like Bullhead City and Laughlin, Nev.

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