

Oro Valley becomes an upscale tech mecca

Attractive suburb lures employees staffing 10 firms

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ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Oro Valley is attracting a new type of mature resident - established high-tech firms whose well-paid employees want beautiful neighborhoods and a short commute.

"People have thought Oro Valley is primarily a retirement community. Not so," said Jeff Weir, Oro Valley's economic development administrator. The town north of Tucson has 38,000 residents and a median age of 45.

Oro Valley's development shows the impact that tech transfer can have on a community, and broadens the portfolio economic development officials use to lure companies to the greater Tucson area.

Downtown Tucson offers an urban environment. Marana offers plenty of land and potential. Oro Valley has mountain views, upscale homes - and 10 high-tech companies, with room for three times more than that.

"Essentially what we've got up there is sort of the emerging upper-middle-class suburbs," said Lay James Gibson, a UA regional economist. "You can argue that the Tucson region is well served by this because you're minimizing the journey to work - you're putting jobs and people together."

Here's what Oro Valley has to offer, according to the 2000 census:

* More than 43 percent of Oro Valley residents had at least a bachelor's degree, nearly double Tucson's 23 percent, Pima County's 27 percent and the state's 24 percent.

* The town's median family income was \$67,600, compared with Tucson's \$37,300, Pima County's \$44,400 and the state's \$46,700.

* Oro Valley's median home value was \$177,400, while Tucson's was \$96,300, Pima County's was \$114,600 and the state's was \$121,300.

Weir attributes the town's success to several factors, including quality schools, resort-style mountain views, parks and cycling trails, and high design standards.

"It helps us recruit people. We're in a very attractive part of town," said Nick Malden, chief financial officer of Ventana Medical Systems Inc., which established its corporate headquarters in Oro Valley two years ago. The company makes machines that process and stain human tissue samples for cancer testing.

Ventana's gleaming white and lavender building, near Tangerine and Oracle roads, welcomes about 380 workers a day, from product packagers and assemblers with high school diplomas to engineers with doctoral degrees.

Like Ventana, many Oro Valley tech firms have affiliations with universities - the University of Arizona or others. "It's important for the ongoing success of the business to have access to research," Weir said.

Ventana's products, for example, are based on a technology originally patented by UA pathologist Dr. Tom Grogan in 1985.

The companies now moving to Oro Valley are past the vulnerable startup stage where they need to be closer to UA or in a startup incubator, Weir said.

Robert Green, founder and president of Integrated Biomolecule Corp., said he looked at industrial sites all over Tucson before he happened to drive by Ventana and fell in love with Oro Valley.

"The amenities are a plus, and what we also found was a town that really wanted us and went out of their way to prove they wanted us," Green said.

Green's company, which specializes in organic chemistry, is building an 18,000-square-foot headquarters at the Rancho Vistoso Tech Center. That's nearly three times the space it had at the UA's Science and Technology Park for the past eight years.

Integrated Biomolecule's new home will include laboratories and a supersterilized clean room. But it's not all business: "We've designed the building to take full advantage of those beautiful views so that everyone can enjoy them."

Some of his employees may move to Oro Valley.

"The area accommodates housing of all levels, from starter housing to very expensive executive housing," he said.

Green, a former New Yorker who serves on a state committee overseeing a 10-year strategy for advancing bioscience industries, sees only potential for his new hometown.

"We're building a building here. That's the epitome of optimism."

Oro Valley officials also are optimistic about landing a prototype clearinghouse where federal research would be commercialized.

An initiative of the federal government and private industry, the clearinghouse is known as the Global Trade and Technology Center and would house every service needed to move an innovation from laboratory to market. A headquarters would likely be established in the Eastern United States, but Oro Valley hopes to be selected for the first satellite site, Weir said.

Town officials envision a \$100 million center in the Rancho Vistoso Tech Center that would include laboratories. Twenty percent of the cost would be paid by the federal government, and private investors would pay the rest.

It would provide work for about 200 people who run the gamut of technology transfer - federal researchers, businesspeople and attorneys among them.

The center would be open to all types of technology, with potential to spin off companies that would want to remain nearby, Weir said.

"It does tie well with what is happening at the university already, and statewide," Weir said.
"This is a very, very major effort."