



Photos by MARY CHIND/Tucson Citizen

Homes are going up at Richmond American's development inside Sabino Springs.

Sabino Springs a reality after an embattled past

Its project manager says 400 homes will be built over the next four years on the edge of the Coronado National Forest.

By **BLAKE MORLOCK**
Citizen Staff Writer

The story of Sabino Springs would suggest the developers have broken mirrors, snatched tails-up pennies and let black cats cross their paths.

The development has not had a lot of luck.

Zoning battles, angry environmentalists, litigation and rough markets have thwarted the 516-home project since its inception in the early 1990s.

But now the mummy's curse is lifting, and there appears to be a bright future for the project that incited so much community unrest.

After a long rezoning battle that nearly wound up in a voter referendum in 1991, the project was in limbo for four years as the initial developer, Perini Land and Development Co., sold the acreage to a real estate partnership.

All that was built in the first four years after the rezoning was a golf course.

Eddie Leon is the project manager for Sabino Springs, and his job was tough for the first few years. He said he couldn't find builders willing to invest in the project on East Snyder Road just east of Harrison Road.

"It was very slow trying to get the building going early on," Leon said. "Now, we're anticipating building 100 new homes a year for the next four

That's when the build-out will be complete.

The problems, Leon said, were twofold. First, he said, the project's location made it difficult for people to get to. Sitting on a boundary of Coronado National Forest, on the extreme fringe of development 20 miles northeast of central Tucson, it's not easy to get to, Leon said.

"It's not just the distance. it's the



Construction workers load tile onto the roof of a home at Sabino Springs.

access," Leon said. "You have to get on Catalina Highway and then take either Harrison or Houghton to get to us. There isn't a direct route to us."

Leon said the other problem was that a lot of homes were in the high end of the market.

"Generally, the sales haven't been too brisk," he said. "But we had a lot of higher-end product on the market. The

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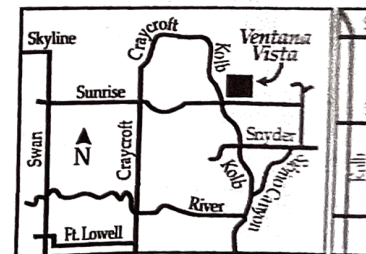


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Sabino Springs

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lower-range products tended to move quicker."

Five of 19 subdivisions have been completed and 70 homes have been built. The developers plat the project, meaning they draw up an acceptable blueprint for development. Then they prepare land with roads and water, sewer and utility service. Once all that work is done, Sabino Springs Properties sells parcels to home builders.

Leon said the project is completely platted and ready to go.

The project has five builders ready to turn the desert into homes.

▼ Richmond-American has agreed to build 100 homes on the property.

▼ Monterey Homes has signed on for 34 lots. Doucette will build 23 homes that will sell for \$250,000.

▼ ContraVest is on for 20 homes.



Cactuses are temporarily transplanted together while land is being developed at Sabino Springs.

▼ Sterling Homes is about to start building.

▼ A sixth builder is expected to join the constructions at Sabino Springs.

Also, Sabino Springs Properties retained 29 half-acre lots for custom homes. Eleven of these lots have sold to private builders.

The problems for the project started in 1991. The project required a rezoning. Neighbors and environmentalists went full-bore against the proposal.

Eventually, Perini was awarded a rezoning that opponents said would savage the desert. So

they took their cause to the electorate.

Opponents gathered some 24,000 signatures demanding that the county's vote be approved by the people.

The developers challenged the signatures, and the legal wrangling went all the way to the Arizona Supreme Court,



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Homes are available in a wide price range at Sabino Springs. This two-story model at The Ridge was built by ContraVest Properties Inc.

which ruled that the referendum drive fell 104 votes shy of the number required to force a countywide vote.

As opposition faded, the project's leaders said they found green religion.

They hired a biologist to see to it the

project was built in an environmentally sensitive manner and have managed to retain about 85 percent of the saguaros on the desert expanse.



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The nursery manager, Tony Sarah, is a native Tucsonan and horticulture graduate of the University of Arizona. He has an extensive background in the Southern Arizona nursery industry for

