

COMMERCIAL REAL ESTATE

LESSONS LEARNED

Fast-growing Pinal County attracts major manufacturers while navigating developmental challenges amid a surge in population growth

LG Energy Solution's \$5.5 billion complex in Queen Creek, under construction on July 31, 2025.

JIM POULIN | PHOENIX BUSINESS JOURNAL



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Story Highlights

- Pinal County's population is projected to reach 640,000 by 2032
- County focuses on attracting major manufacturing projects for economic growth

- Officials remain cautious after learning tough lessons during Great Recession

To lean into the future, Pinal County decision-makers are also wary of the past.

The county, which sits in the southern half of the state between Maricopa and Pima counties, is one of the fastest-growing jurisdictions in [Arizona and nationally](#). Its population is quickly approaching half a million people and is projected to grow to over 640,000 by 2032, according to the county's [2024 labor market analysis](#).

In a trend aligned with Pinal County's goal to sustainably build a "diversified economy," development has shifted in recent years to attracting major manufacturing projects. County leaders are focused on adding shopping centers, housing projects and [transportation improvements](#) to build out their communities along the way.

Joel Millman, interim director of Pinal County's economic and workforce development department, describes some recent major projects as "game changers" – developments that bring jobs, improve infrastructure and encourage development around them.

A development such as LG Energy Solution's [\\$5.5 billion Queen Creek factory](#) is a perfect example. Other projects, like Lucid Motor's original [electric vehicle factory](#) in Casa Grande or [Maricopa's](#) in-the-works [Vestar Towne Center development](#), also fit the description.



Electric vehicle assembly at Lucid Group's Casa Grande facility.

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Still, some officials who worked in the county during the devastating impacts of

the Great Recession, are leery of developments that appear to be a sure thing but never break ground.

Robert Klob, who sits on planning and zoning commissions with Pinal County and the city of Maricopa, calls these developments “zombie projects” and warns about them during commission meetings. Leftover zombies – plots of empty land or projects slowly inching along or on hold – serve as reminders.

“If we look at lessons we – those of us who have been around for a long time – hopefully learned from 2008 of these zombie developments, that do occur,” Klob said at a [June 9 city of Maricopa planning and zoning meeting](#). “Luckily, we haven’t had many that have occurred recently, but there are a lot of developments that never got developed.”

Lessons learned during Great Recession

Officials describe the Great Recession toward the end of the 2000s as an era during which communities, hungry for growth and major projects, rapidly greenlit everything. Doreen Cott, Queen Creek’s economic development director, said lessons from that era inform today’s planning.

“[The Recession] gave us time to kind of catch our breath and kind of recalibrate, because it was so busy and there was no way that that fast growth was going to sustain,” Cott said. “Looking back, a lot of communities had those lessons learned.”

Even today, Maricopa’s [Industrial Triangle](#) – the SMARTRail Park, Murphy Park and University of Arizona research center [featured in a Business Journal report in 2024](#) – has had few public updates, although Klob did mention ongoing negotiations for an unspecified industrial development. And as the battery-producing wing of Queen Creek’s LGES factory nears completion, its second phase, an energy storage wing, [remains paused indefinitely](#).

“The status quo for many years, both Pinal County and the city of Maricopa has been – I don’t like to use the word rubber stamp – but it’s been a fairly simple path,” Klob said, referring to the “sins of the past” he described at a recent commission meeting.

Today, roadmaps and rules are in place to avoid those mistakes. Millman said the county works with developers up front to ensure they can move smoothly through the approval process. In Maricopa, projects are approved with agreements outlining building times, according to Christian Price, the city’s economic growth officer.

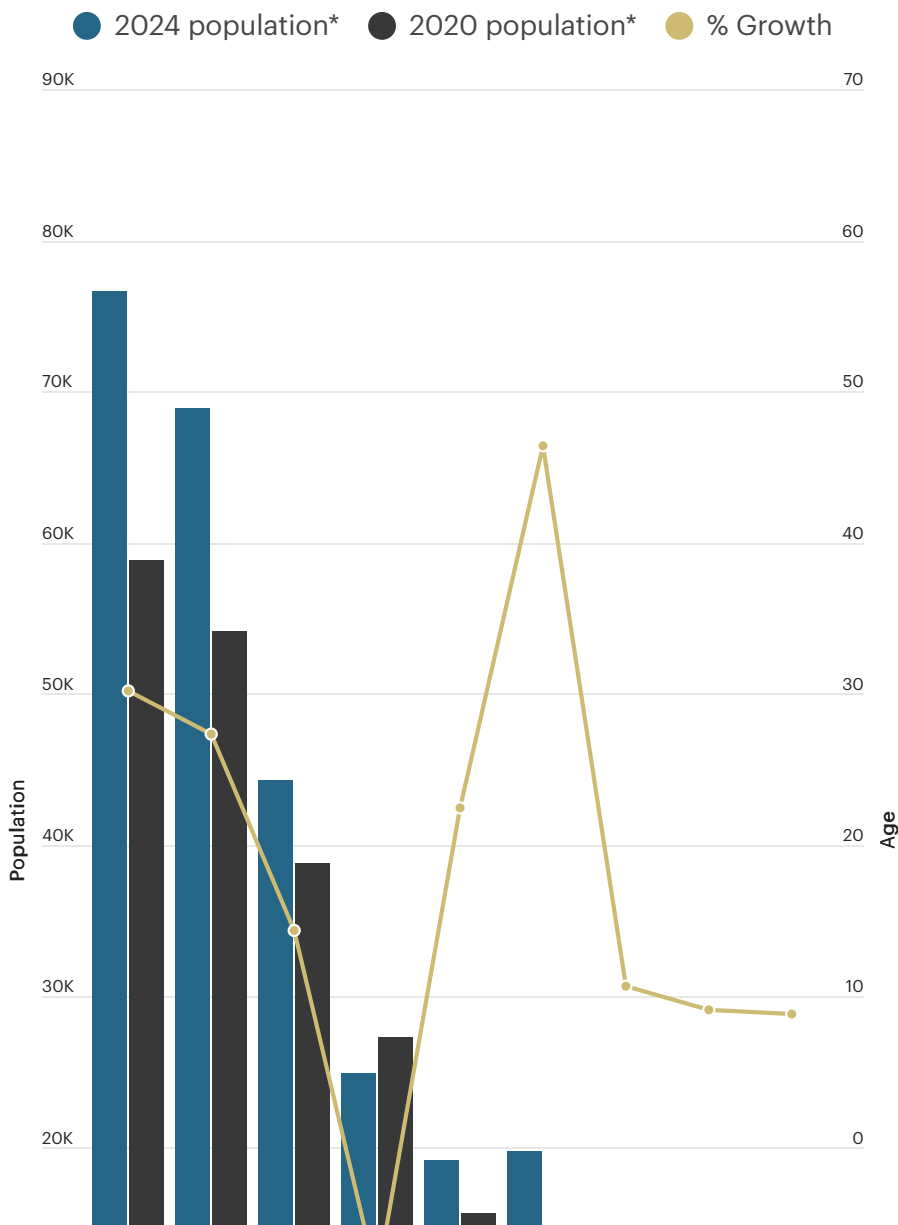
San Tan Valley incorporates

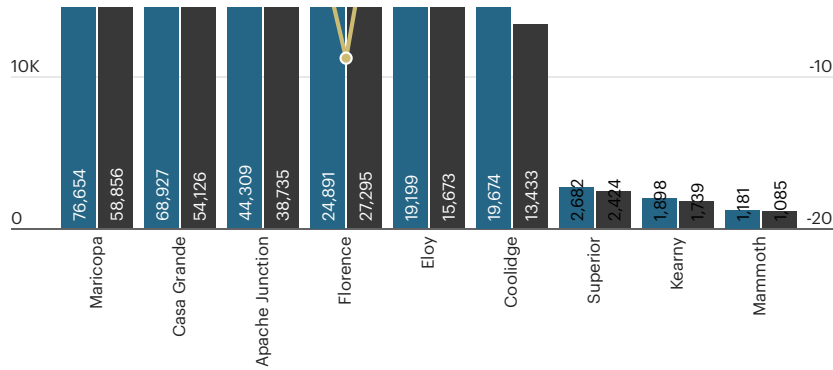
Pinal County is ever-changing due to fluctuating unincorporated land and population growth.

It has three Native American communities, and much of the county is unincorporated or uninhabited state or federal land. On Aug. 5, San Tan Valley, home to nearly a quarter of Pinal County's population, [voted to incorporate](#) into its own town, a move that could have key implications for future development in that area. For now, San Tan Valley will continue to rely on the county for additional support and services until next July.

Pinal County population growth, cities

Multiple Pinal County cities have seen huge population growth since 2020





Source: U.S. Census Bureau's Vintage 2024 population estimates for Pinal County
 *Unincorporated regions not included. Queen Creek excluded, as half of city is in Maricopa county

These changing dynamics require constant communication between the communities and cities as they strive to achieve development goals. Millman described an attitude of, “I can't get this project to land in my community, then the next best thing is, I want this project to land in Pinal County.”

“It is relatively easy to bring the players to the table that need to be at the table,” Millman said. “That goes from the mayor of a community to a representative from the board of supervisors to the county manager. If the project's big enough and everybody wants it, it's all hands on deck.”

In Queen Creek, Arizona's fastest-growing city according to recent Census data, a move in 2019 to annex more than 4,000 acres of land made a huge difference in helping to bring bigger potential projects to the table.



Doreen Cott, economic development developer, Town of Queen Creek, speaks on Aug. 14, 2025, at the Pinal County Growth Summit in Casa Grande, next to Josh Bowman, chief strategy officer, City of Maricopa.

Queen Creek is divided between Maricopa and Pinal counties, and that annexation increased its footprint in Pinal.

“My day-to-day job has changed over the last – I’ll call it probably four to five years – from mostly retail attraction and commercial development to these larger employers and employment development,” Cott said.

Shift to manufacturing, industrial

Other Pinal County communities have seen similar commercial and manufacturing development. Casa Grande highlights this trend with its [Kohler Co.](#), [FrameTec](#) and [Lucid](#) factories, all announced in the 2020s. This year, Lucid also moved into a [plant in Coolidge](#) formerly owned by Nikola Corp. as part of a “strategic expansion.”

“One of the targeted sectors that’s been in [Queen Creek’s strategic plan] for many years is advanced manufacturing,” Cott said. “It’s only been in the last few [years] that we’ve seen the fruits of that.”

In July, [fast-growing](#) Apache Junction, which has seen an [influx of housing projects](#), approved its [largest industrial project](#): a 65,000-square-foot Sundt Construction manufacturing facility that will bring 100 jobs. The city’s economic development director, Ryan Kaup, told the Business Journal that Sundt “liked the untapped workforce,” and the company said U.S. Highway 60 access was a draw.



A conceptual rendering of Sundt Construction's 65,000-square-foot offsite manufacturing facility in Apache Junction.

COURTESY OF SUNDT CONSTRUCTION

The county has also taken on pushes in emerging industries like renewable

energy. In July, a solar project near Florence called Box Canyon [reached commercial operation](#). Meanwhile, Casa Grande is [clearing hurdles](#) to get construction at a copper mine started next year.

Pairing that growth with the population and the side effects of landing a major manufacturer like LGES, Queen Creek's Cott expects “continued interest from more of the advanced manufacturing type businesses.”

Retail, workforce goals

Despite the manufacturing buzz, retail remains a priority, especially for younger communities like Maricopa, which has Lowe's, Home Depot and Costco stores in place, and [Target rumors swirling](#) around the Vestar project.

Queen Creek is adding [another Target at a second Vestar development](#) to its existing roster of established retailers, including Ashley Furniture Industries and Hobby Lobby locations, at Queen Creek Crossing.

“Not everything can be advanced manufacturing, but we do know that it is a major contributor to the financial well-being of the county,” Millman said.



Vestar opened the 900,000-square-foot Queen Creek Marketplace in 2008.

VESTAR

On the county level, Michelle Carpenter, the county's economic development coordinator, attends national conferences to connect with retail giants and “keep pace” with the population's desire for amenities.

“We really do like to accept a lot of mixture of things, because we absolutely need. I equate us a little bit to a spider web,” added Maricopa's Price. “Anything that comes along, we're going to take a look at. It doesn't mean we say yes to

everything, but we're going to take a good look at it.”

One of Pinal County's unique challenges is nearly 81% of residents commute outside the county for work, described by local leaders as a “hidden workforce.” Millman, who also directs Pinal County's [ARIZONA@WORK](#), manages workforce development efforts.

“What we're trying to do is inform the public, inform our workforce that the industry cluster of which we're attracting do provide that variety of opportunity,” he said. “We have to be cognizant of not only the main attraction but the supply chain and then the support around it, which could involve commercial and retail.”

For example, Future48 Workforce accelerator – a partnership with the Arizona Commerce Authority, Pinal County and Central Arizona College – is facilitating [hiring](#) efforts at LGES.

“The goal is to be able to live, work and play here in the city of Maricopa indefinitely,” said Price, echoing a goal many other leaders have. “If you don't have to leave, we don't want you to leave.”

So, which comes first, the chicken or the egg? Should Pinal County target industries based on its population and trained employee force, or should it train the workforce to support industries that choose the county?

In many cases, developers cite the workforce as a reason for choosing Pinal County and its communities. For LGES, Queen Creek's “educated” and “abundant” workforce was appealing. In other cases, the county builds a workforce specific to a project. Often, it's a blend of both.

Aside from the workforce, infrastructure improvements are critical to make future growth possible. After LGES committed to build out in Queen Creek, the town initiated [an \\$80 million project](#) for new road, water and wastewater infrastructure around the facility.

For Millman, Pinal's best-case scenario includes “infrastructure in place,” from roads to energy stability. Most of his in-city counterparts would say the same. At an Aug. 4 panel featuring Casa Grande's economic development director, Richard Wilkie, and Eloy's assistant city manager, Mackenzie Letcher, infrastructure was a common theme, [Pinal Central reported](#).

“I think one of the biggest topics that every economic development manager, director of any city, is faced with these days is trying to maintain that utility infrastructure,” Wilkie said at the panel.

Residential development heats up

Other leaders, particularly from Eloy, mentioned housing concerns. Although Pinal County is among the region's [most affordable home markets](#), the state's housing shortage and [uncertain interest rates](#) has hampered homebuilders, despite some [major developments](#) and [government programs](#). Klob said stricter housing safety and design standards would improve home quality and zombie-proof major developments.

Still, one of several Pinal County hotspots for residential development is [Apache Junction](#), where D.R. Horton Inc. is building out its Radiance at Superstition Vistas master-planned community that eventually will boast 5,000 homes, just as Brookfield Residential is developing 1,400 acres next door at its master plan, called Blossom Rock at Superstition Vistas.



Brookfield Residential is developing the 1,400-acre Blossom Rock at Superstition Vistas master-planned community in Apache Junction.

BROOKFIELD RESIDENTIAL

Additionally, the need for more transportation infrastructure connecting communities remains; it would bolster one of the county's biggest attractions: its connectivity to major roadways like Interstate 10, Interstate 8 and U.S. Route 60. Efforts to [further extend](#) State Route 24, which connects to Loop 202, and a proposal for the [Central Arizona Parkway](#), a 14-mile north-to-south route connecting to Arizona Farms Road, remain in a [funding scramble](#).

“As the transportation stuff gets figured out, on the San Tan side of it – the Parkway, the future highway – that will help cement the future and where that growth goes,” said Joshua Simon, founder and chief executive officer at SimonCRE. “Right now, there are some question marks.”

Population growth, the unending need to improve infrastructure and housing supply, the chicken-and-egg development question, the push for game changers. All of it keeps decision-makers of Pinal County busy.

But, these planners would argue they're trending toward projects that matter, and will be seen through to the end as developers, charmed by Pinal's "small town feel," keep the county booming. Even zombies from the past, like Maricopa's [2012-proposed Estrella Gin Business Park](#), could potentially be resurrected.

"That is the mantra. We want to find a way to say yes," Maricopa's Price said. "And in a world where all development is suddenly bad everywhere else, we want you here, and that's a big deal."

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