

GILBERT GROWS UP

Uncovering the "It" factor of the nation's fastest growing town

By Jennifer Keeler



Gilbert Mayor Steve Burman

This is an incredibly exciting time for the Town of Gilbert. We are the fastest-growing community of more than 100,000 people in the country, and with that population growth we're experiencing an influx of new businesses and more opportunities for unique commercial development than ever before.

Some of the exciting projects currently under construction include the Santan Freeway, Mercy Gilbert Medical Center, Westcor's SanTan Village regional mall, Woodbine Southwest's Main Street Commons mixed-use project and the Santan Autoplex. You can read more about each of these projects in this article.

One of the reasons Gilbert has become so attractive to businesses is because the town is also a great place to live and raise a family. Gilbert's demographics are among the most impressive in the state, with two-thirds of adults having attended college and an estimated median household income of approximately \$80,000. We are known throughout Arizona as a place that emphasizes safe, clean neighborhoods and quality commercial and residential development.

According to an old Irish saying, "The best way to predict the future is to create it." In Gilbert, that is exactly what we are doing, and there has never been a more optimistic time to live or work in Gilbert than right now.

Enjoy the article.
Gilbert Mayor Steve Berman

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What, exactly, is attracting so much attention to Gilbert, Arizona? What is pushing this once quiet farming community into the national scene as the fastest growing town of its size in the nation, with a population nearing 175,000 and an estimated growth rate of 1,000 new residents each month?

Gilbert's "It" factor can actually be attributed to a combination of invaluable elements—the positive reputation of the Gilbert Unified School District; the quality and availability of new residential and commercial developments, as well as creative economic development efforts; the future Santan Freeway, which will offer unprecedented connectivity to the rest of the Valley; and a highly regarded quality of life.

Because of these inviting attributes, an estimated 1,000 people move to Gilbert every month, according to the Town of Gilbert

2005 Community Profile. Those new residents have a median age of 30.1 years and many are entering the prime of their professional years. The median household income in Gilbert is \$80,000, greater than the medians of both the Greater Phoenix area and the country. More than 36% also hold a bachelor's degree or higher. This young, well-educated work force teamed with technology-driven companies calling Gilbert home are a good match for each other, says business development specialist Doreen Cott, and has spurred exacting progress on every front—from community life to major economic development efforts.

From Hometown Roots

The Gilbert of today has come a long way from its agricultural roots as "The hay capital of the world." Yet, its determination to grow in commercial prestige and development savvy, while not losing sight of its humble beginnings, ranks as one of the town's greatest assets.

The Morrison family saw those beginnings take shape when they began farming not hay, but cotton, corn and alfalfa in Gilbert 70 years ago. "I grew up in Gilbert when it was 2,000 people," says Scott Morrison, a third-generation resident. As the years went by, the family began to see development inch closer to their farm. But rather than feel the squeeze, the entrepreneurial family decided to join the game and turn part of their land into a master-planned community. "While nice projects were being built, none were characteristically Gilbert," says Morrison.

Today, three generations of Morrisons are transforming most of their fields into what they now call Morrison Ranch, a 2,000-acre master-planned community complete with residential, commercial and industrial components—a mix of well-planned live-work elements that has become a key to Gilbert's popularity and success.

In the residential portion of Morrison Ranch, buyers can choose anything from an apartment to a one-acre lot—and anything in between.

The family aimed to re-create an agricultural, small-town feel in the midst of full-swing urban sprawl. They focused on the ideas of wide, tree-lined streets leading to neighborhood parks. As Morrison tells it, the family wanted to develop a community that would stand the test of time; a place they could show their grandchildren someday. "Two elements we've keyed on are agricultural heritage and family orientation," he says.

Although a few members of the Morrison family still farm in Gilbert, most have moved to the development side of the family business. "Several of us made a complete career change to do this," Morrison says. "I was a cotton farmer for 10 years, but you can't really call me a cotton farmer anymore."

According to the Arizona Real Estate Center at Arizona State University's Polytechnic Campus, the median home price in Gilbert in July was \$315,000—a 49% rise from the previous year when the median home price was \$212,000.

Downtown Heritage District

Like the Morrison family, most long-time businesspeople and residents of Gilbert have seen this community's transformation firsthand, and most have a similar story.

Joe Johnston's story began with a drive down Gilbert Road one afternoon in 1995. The Gilbert resident saw the most charming red-brick building, and with two partners (brothers Tim and Tad Peelen), bought the property. With their collective knowledge of barbecue and business and their affection for Gilbert, the partners created Joe's Real BBQ. The restaurant opened its doors in January 1998, serving Arizona smoked meats and home-cooked food. It proved to be a hit, and thanks to the old-fashioned loyalty of Gilbert residents, business has been booming.

Joe's Real BBQ is located in Gilbert's Heritage District, along Gilbert Road and among a host of other unique small businesses. The focus on Gilbert's history and the district's distinctiveness was a perfect match for the restaurant, Peelen says. "We think Gilbert, particularly the Heritage District, is ideal for this restaurant."

The Heritage District, Gilbert's original downtown, is also home to businesses such as the Hale Center Theatre, The Farmhouse Restaurant and Ink It!, and will soon welcome the newest location of the popular Oregano's Pizza Bistro. The town wants to preserve this historic downtown area while encouraging the success of its unique businesses. To make this goal a reality, the Town crafted the Heritage District Redevelopment Plan, outlining a strategy for attracting businesses that generate uses, stimulate growth and provide an identity for the area. These uses include office space, specialty shops, entertainment venues and restaurants. Town officials are also hoping the redevelopment plan will continue on its path of encouraging reinvestment in the area, spurring rehabilitation of old buildings, parking improvements, street beautification and assemblage of land for new development.



Family farms like this are disappearing and being replaced by master-planned communities.



Oregano's Pizza Bistro is located in the sleepy downtown of Gilbert's Heritage District.

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This plan is just a part of the town's overall scheme to revive older parts of the community to keep them as viable and attractive as newer developments while maintaining the original charm.

Joe's Real BBQ is a good example of this process. The restaurant was born out of a fateful drive through the Heritage District and has grown into Joe Johnston's interest in other areas of the community, yet it still harkens back to the Johnston's family early days when they owned a large farm at Ray and Higley roads. Like the Morrison family, the Johnstons have since decided to foray into development and are now transforming Johnston Farms into Agritopia.



Located in SanTan Village, the largest commercial development in Gilbert, is a Wal-Mart Supercenter.

Agritopia is a mixed-use community made up of homes, urban agriculture, commercial development, parks and winding walkways throughout, all circled around a remaining piece of the Johnston family farm. The fresh produce grown at the farm will be cooked in the restaurants in the community, including Joe's Farm Grill, another venture created by partners Johnston and the Peelens that will open in 2006.

Big Business Boom

Farmers and small-business owners have proven small business is plentiful in Gilbert, and big business is doing the same on Gilbert's corporate front.

Sales tax revenue in Gilbert is projected to be \$41.2 million for fiscal year 2005 and will grow to \$47.9 million for fiscal year 2006 and \$54.2 million for fiscal year 2007, according to the Gilbert Town Manager's Office.

To help big business thrive, the town has strategically planned for new commercial and employment projects and has taken an active role in planning the best uses and spaces for growth. This is particularly critical considering that Gilbert will soon welcome the Santan Freeway, which is scheduled to reach Gilbert Road by the end of 2005 with the remainder of its path completed through Gilbert by spring 2006.

"Careful planning has poised Gilbert to take advantage of the opportunities presented along the Santan Freeway as it continues to support and promote the businesses that have been part of the town's rise," says Doreen Cott, business development specialist in the economic development department. "The goal is to be an exceptional master-planned community where residents and companies can live, work, play and excel," she says.

The town has identified key business clusters and is making an effort to attract businesses in industries such as aerospace, high-tech, life sciences and business services. Companies such as Spectrum Astro, founded by Gilbert resident Dave Thompson and recently bought by General Dynamics, have nudged the town even closer to that goal. Spectrum Astro, now part of General

Dynamics C4 Systems, is a leader in the design and manufacture of high-performance satellites for space missions.

Thompson founded Spectrum Astro in California and brought the company and factory to Gilbert in 1992. The move came only after Thompson surveyed several major western cities, then choosing Gilbert for its low cost of high-quality housing for his employees. "The real attraction of Gilbert was for the employees," he says. "The employees found they could get twice the house for half the cost."

At the time of Thompson's sale of Spectrum Astro in 2004 the company had 550 employees and was ringing \$160 million in annual revenue.

After the sale, Thompson launched Gilbert-based Thompson Industries, an investment and consulting company to others in the aerospace and defense industries. Thompson, who admits he enjoys making his opinions heard at the town council meetings, says talks of starting a company focused on alternative energy sources might also be in his future.

Commercial Takes Off

Other big business ventures in the works in Gilbert include SanTan Village, located at the Santan Freeway and Williams Field Road. This 500-acre site will be transformed into an upscale shopping center, making it the largest commercial development in Gilbert. Tenants of the power center include Wal-Mart Supercenter, Sam's Club, Circuit City and Bed, Bath and Beyond. The first phase of development began in early 2005 and additional phases will include specialty boutique shops, a home furnishings cluster, and a movie theater that will anchor the mall site.

Main Street Commons is another project creating buzz. Located at Pecos Road and Val Vista Drive, the project is slated to open in 2006. This open-air, mixed-use urban district promises to provide national and local retailers, dining, entertainment and office space with a focus on a unique streetscape and architecture.

Gilbert has also made arrangements to make itself an automotive destination with the Santan Motorplex, located at Val Vista Drive and the Santan Freeway. The Santan Motorplex will be the largest automall in the state of Arizona at 120 acres. Its first dealership, Santan Ford, is slated to open in 2006. Others will include GMC, Suzuki, Subaru and Saturn.

Other commercial developments include Crossroads Towne Center at the Santan Freeway and Gilbert Road, Gilbert Gateway Towne Center at the Santan Freeway and Power Road next to Williams Gateway Airport, and Gilbert Towne Square at Gilbert and Warner roads, just west of the town's civic complex. Together, these developments have helped Gilbert to more than double its inventory of commercial space in the past few years from 1.6 million square feet to almost 3.5 million square feet and promote its fifth key business cluster: entertainment and retail.

Office space is making its mark in Gilbert as well, partly due to UTAZ Development Corp., headed by Craig Willett. UTAZ, which specializes in office condos or "professional villages" (a term that



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UTAZ coined) has been a trendsetter in the industry and particularly in Gilbert.

The company has 14 professional villages under construction or in planning stages in Gilbert, including a development for its own offices at Baseline and Lindsay roads. "The Santan Freeway coming through has exploded the growth in Gilbert," Willett says.

Willett says his company has picked some strategic areas along the freeway to build its office condo projects. UTAZ has been at the front of the pack of office condo developers as one of the first on the office condo scene. The company's focus is to determine the needs of small-business owners, one of the most underserved groups, according to Willett. "Our company is based on the value of the American dream," he says. "It's based on ownership."



The \$10 million Gilbert Emergency Hospital under construction

Office condos give small-businesses owners, such as doctors, dentists, accountants and other business-services professionals,

the opportunity to own their office space rather than rent. The average size of an office condo is 2,500 to 3,000 square feet and ranges in cost from \$180,000 to \$245,000, depending on the location of the project and the condo location within the village.

Small-business owners, especially those in Gilbert, seem to be a market long overdue for attention, which makes UTAZ projects all the more popular. "We're excited about Gilbert," Willett says. "Every project we do there is a success."

Even with all this new retail and office development in the works, there is still room for more. The town has more than 4,000 acres designated for commercial development. Currently, there are approximately 1,600 acres of that land left for development, Cott says.

In the Big Leagues

New development and growth has proven that Gilbert can not only dream big, but also think outside the box to make the big deals that benefit the community. This rings especially true with the town's public/private partnership with Big League Dreams, the California-based creator of deluxe sports parks.

Big League Dreams will partner with the town to create the Elliot Road District Park, a 53-acre park on Elliot and Power roads. This is the first time Gilbert has partnered with a private company on a parks and recreation facility of this size and scope.

Preliminary design plans feature eight baseball and softball fields, soccer fields, a batting cage, two Tot Lots playground areas, a Miracle League field built for physically and mentally challenged baseball players, and two air-conditioned and heated concession areas overlooking the fields.

The real hook of Big League Dreams is that its

baseball and softball fields are scaled-down replicas of famous stadiums around the country, such as Yankee Stadium in New York, Wrigley Field in Chicago and Fenway Park in Boston.

Municipalities are attracted to Big League Dreams because the company offers assistance in designing, operating and maintaining its parks. "The crux is really that local governments across the country need more parks and recreation facilities," says Don Webber, vice president of development for Big League Dreams.

But, Webber says, the towns often don't know how to build such sports parks and if they do, they can't maintain them. The company has five parks in California and Texas, and another nine in planning stages or under construction in California, Arizona, Nevada and Texas. Since it opened its first park in Cathedral City, Calif., the company has been getting calls from as far away as Florida and Hawaii.

Big League Dreams has two goals, according to Webber: one, to create more recreational facilities, and two, to generate economic development dollars for the towns and cities where they are located. The Cathedral City sports complex brought the city \$13 million in annual economic impact, says Webber, making the parks a hot commodity for many developing towns.

The company performed a demographic study of Gilbert to determine the requirements of the town, but says Webber, "Gilbert already knew its needs, and we just helped them to fine-tune those needs."

Planning for the Elliot Road District Park is well under way. "In a year and a half, we should be playing ball," says Webber.

Coming Soon

To ensure that Gilbert is a self-sufficient community where residents don't have to go far for anything, the town is approving new and strategic development at almost every corner, including several hospitals and emergency centers.

Gilbert Emergency Hospital, located at Ray and Power roads, will be an emergency-only, \$10 million facility, and the only hospital of its kind in the Valley. It is scheduled for completion this year.

The \$189 million Banner Gateway Medical Center is slated to open in the fall of 2007. This 60-acre medical campus will be located at the Superstition Freeway and Higley Road, and will accommodate 165 beds.

Megadevelopers Bill and Sherry Lund are also getting involved in the hospital industry with the Mercy Gilbert Medical Center. The Lunds are the creators of the Spectrum master-planned community on Val Vista Drive between Pecos Road and the Santan Freeway. The community includes 3,500 homes, the Main Street Commons shopping center, the future Santan Motorplex and Mercy Gilbert.

The Lunds are developing the medical center in partnership with Catholic Healthcare West, the creators of Chandler Regional Hospital. The medical campus will consist of seven buildings, including a state-of-the-art educational facility. Mercy Gilbert is scheduled to open in the spring of 2006, initially with 100 beds but with a capacity to grow to 400 beds. It also will include a five-



Mercy Gilbert Medical Center finds itself nestled next to "old Gilbert."



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acre center, a project close to the Lunds' hearts. The Center for Healing, as it is temporarily called, will feature a totally integrated center for healing with emphasis on cancer therapy. Sherry Lund's goal is to create a place where those suffering from illnesses can go to heal and get treatment from medical and naturopathic doctors working together to give the best care possible.

"We want to show that integrated medicine is the way of the future," says Sherry Lund. The healing process will begin from the moment a patient steps out of the car and into the tranquil healing gardens found throughout the campus. "Our focus is to get back to healing," she says. "Instead of just medicating."

In addition to the healing center, several specialty clinics will be available at the hospital with a focus on dental, pediatrics, wound care, diabetes care and veterinary care. The cancer center also will feature a TomoTherapy machine, a technologically advanced cancer treatment system. The \$4 million machine will be the only one in the state, according to Lund. "It's exciting to be able to be on that cutting edge," she says.

The project is especially important to Lund because, after the loss of her stepdaughter to liver failure, she realized there needed to be more for patients and their families going through the grief of terminal illness. Her stepdaughter's life was saved once before by doctors using integrated medicine, she says, and Lund wants the same for others.

Lund and her stepdaughter discussed creating a facility like The Center for Healing. It was important to her stepdaughter that free medical care be available for those who could not afford it. Because of that wish, the center will offer free medical care to underprivileged families. The free health-care program would focus on families in Gilbert, but it won't turn anyone away. Doctors from the WellCare Foundation, a group of medical professionals who

donate their time for free, will work in the clinics as well, says Lund.

"I love doing this," she says. "Everyday I can make a difference in somebody's life. It's really rewarding." The Lunds began working on this project

in Gilbert eight years ago with a vision for what Bill Lund thought Gilbert needed.

Hello, Neighbor

Neighborliness like that of the Lunds has always been an important aspect of Gilbert's design. Although the town was first seen as just a thoroughfare for the railroad track—a stop established in 1902 along the Arizona Eastern Railway and later becoming a community named after property owner William "Bobby" Gilbert—it quickly became a place with close-knit neighborly ties.

As the town began its growth spurt in the 1980s, the town council realized it needed a progressive growth strategy to handle the inevitable development that they saw happening in Tempe, Mesa and Chandler. According to the town's community profile on its official Web site, in the last two decades, Gilbert has grown at a pace unmatched by most other communities.

Today, the town is keeping pace with the development of homes, shopping centers and industrial parks to maintain the quality of life for its new and existing residents. This means supporting commercial development with those efforts that maintain and grow community, including an award-winning school system, regularly planned town special events, endeavors in the arts and much more.

Most new residents moved to Gilbert for these reasons and are banking on their ability to keep the town growing in the right direction. "A decade from now, Gilbert will be just that much more of what it is today—an ever-thriving community with continued residential growth, premier shopping and entertainment destinations, and quality employment opportunities," says Cott.

Gilbert's third-term mayor, Steven Berman, says the growth in the community has been a welcome progression and hasn't been too tough to manage. According to Mayor Berman, Gilbert has had a detailed master plan for growth. "We've known for some time where everything was going to go," he says. "Now it's just filling in the blanks."

Like a paint-by-numbers for town officials, they appear to be making the right moves to maintain Gilbert's position as a premier Valley community.

Berman predicts that Gilbert will continue to fill out as a well-rounded community, like a Pleasantville, he explains, offering eye-catching amenities to its residents. "Everything you're looking for, Gilbert has," he says.

Not bad for "The hay capital of the world."



The Loop 202, now under construction, will provide Gilbert with easy access to the rest of the Valley.



One of the few farms remaining in Gilbert

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