

Sarah J. Boggan, Tribune

Since Bruce and Luvena Arehart moved into their Anthem at Merrill Ranch home a year ago, they've watched the community around them rise out of the ground.

The Areharts were the first to move into the master-planned "lifestyle" community in Florence and were also the first to be married at the recreation center there.

In a year of firsts at Anthem at Merrill Ranch, hundreds of homes are now filled with families and dozens more are under construction. Community areas such as a water park and pools are being well used by residents, and the first grocery store will open in a matter of months.

Anthem will reach 9,100 homes at buildout with more than 20,000 residents, according to the developer, Pulte Homes. Last August, Pulte officials said they expected to reach that buildout by 2016 but earlier, in May of this same year, they had forecast buildout by 2012.



Luvena and Bruce Arehart were the first residents of Anthem at Merrill Ranch in Florence they were also the first to get married there at the Community Center.

The timeline has been moved back slowly and now Brandon Jones, director of operations for Pulte Homes, said "buildout depends on the market."

"Could sales be better? Yeah, but I think we're pleased," Jones said. "We have over 400 people living out here."

Company officials would not disclose sales numbers. But local real estate experts said more distant communities such as Florence and Maricopa are feeling the brunt of the slow housing market because of resale market competition.

Jones said the number of people visiting the community and going through the model homes "is not what it was, but people like the Del Webb brand and want to see what we're doing."

Homes at Sun City Anthem, an age-restricted development, start in the \$140,000s and the multi-age development Parkside has prices starting in the \$120,000s.

“Sun City is a different kind of buyer,” Jones said, noting that retirees are seasonal buyers and the summer in Arizona is not prime buying time. “(Sales there) are not quite as affected.”

Jones said he is pleased with the progress they’ve had in their first year.

“When I think about all we’ve accomplished — the real sense of arrival, the first major grocer in Florence, the swim park and a full lifestyle calendar — I think we’ve done a good job,” he said. “It’s amazing to think in a year we’ve built all this and delivered on our promise of a lifestyle.”

Pulte also has widened Hunt Highway, mostly a two-lane road between Queen Creek and Florence, to six lanes in front of the development’s main entrance.

Like Anthem, Bruce Arehart said he and his wife keep adding things to their house — most recently a new security door. Arehart, who moved from East Mesa after selling his home last year, said he wouldn’t change his decision to move to Sun City Anthem.

Sandi Campbell, who moved to Anthem Parkside in February from another development in Florence, said she and her husband and 3-year-old daughter think living there has been “everything we’ve hoped for. The amenities are any kid’s dream,” she said. “It’s got the schools, the community center, parks and the friendliest neighbors.”

On Campbell’s street there are only a couple of occupied homes and several are being built that haven’t yet been purchased. She said she’s noticed fewer people moving in and buying homes “but that goes with anyplace that is selling homes right now,” she said.

In Anthem’s second year, Jones said, people will see more of the same.

“We want to refine the foundation we’ve built by working with residents and finding even more opportunities to create the lifestyle people want,” he said. “This is a great place.”