

Tri-County developments

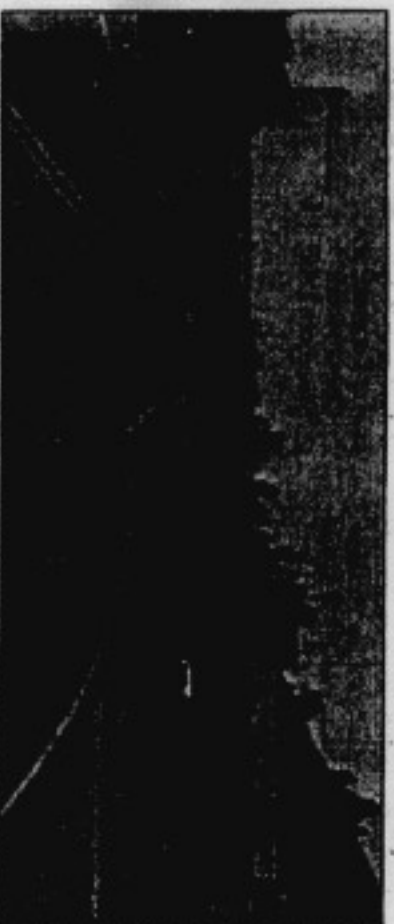


PHOTO COURTESY OF CALIFORNIA DEPARTMENT OF TRANSPORTATION
The Tri-Valley (Benton, Hammill and Chalfant) area of Mono County is experiencing growing pains, with more than 60 new homes planned for the Chalfant community. Some of Chalfant's new homes will be located across from the Chalfant Mercantile, on U.S. 6.

Working on a match of community values

By Christina Reed
Mammoth Times Staff Writer

Bordered by the White Mountains on the east, the volcanic Tablelands and Casa Diablo on the west and just south of the California-Nevada border, the Tri-Valley area in Mono County is fast becoming the county's biggest eastern real estate interest. The small ranching and farming communities of Benton (on the northern end of the Highway 6 corridor), Hammill Valley (in the center of the corridor) and Chalfant Valley support about 708 people on nearly 14,000 acres of private land, according to the 2000 Census. Federal agencies and the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power make up the remaining landholders.

Hammill and Benton are both slated for residential development and plans for more new homes are being processed

for Chalfant. Land prices have climbed in the Tri-Valley area, and the typically agricultural landscape has begun to sprout million-dollar properties. The bigger ranches sported multi-million-dollar price tags, and the Doonan family recently purchased the historic Montgomery Creek Ranch (an 818-acre property) through a unique land trust conservation project negotiated through the Eastern Sierra Land Trust. This family ranch will remain a working organic alfalfa ranch (not subject to development), complete with water rights. This transaction, in conjunction with the California Department of Conservation's Farmland program, is another large tract of land in conservation in the county.

Subdivision projects are also being planned and some of the working landscape has been turned over to residential neighborhoods. In recent decades, about 12 ranches provided Mono County with everything from alfalfa, garlic and pota-

Please see "TRI-VALLEY" MT page 9

Tri-Valley continued from MT 8

toes to carrots and organic crops. While more and more land is being planned for neighborhoods, Mono County's agricultural production (from these valleys) continues to play a major role in the county's second biggest economic value—agriculture (tourism is number one). The Inyo and Mono Counties Agriculture report for 2003 indicated an 11 percent increase from 2002.

Harp Hazard, Supervisor for District #2 and the Tri-Valley region, holds regular community office hours and in the past, the hot topics of conversation have been the residential and real estate developments, minimum and maximum lot sizes, schools for the growing population, and additional services for the increasing numbers of citizens. While many of the residents work in the area and travel to Bishop to do their shopping, Mono County is still changed with providing emergency services, educational opportunities and infrastructure for the three valleys. More people mean that more sheriff deputies, fire personnel and medical facilities will be needed, as well as new locales for these new services. Providing these services, from county centers in Bridgeport and Mammoth Lakes, will also be challenging. If the Tri-Valley region is to avoid creating a sprawled-out series of unplanned residential communities.

Hazard says there were about 67 homes planned for the Chalfant community (50 across from the mercantile and 17 at the Osage project), and other homes projected for Benton. Hazard believes the additional development will also bring some benefits, such as a redesign of U.S. 6, cable services, service providers will be encouraged to compete in the area. The challenge for the county will be to "make sure development matches the values of the community," Hazard notes.

The Tri-Valley region still offers affordable housing options for many families looking to own an acre or more of land with the opportunity of having livestock on the property; with an average lot size of 2.5 acres, these properties look very attractive. The region also has tremendous scenic values with the White Mountains and Fish Stough Area providing dramatic backgrounds and Benton Hot Springs historic sites nearby. The communities are also close to the major business centers of Bishop and Mammoth Lakes, so the draw for commuting residents is the chance to have a home of their own located near the major job markets.

A decade ago there were only a handful of people driving the 100-mile trip from Chalfant or Benton around to Bishop and back up to Mammoth (via U.S. 395). Ten years ago, property values were still within reach in Mammoth and housing was more affordable for working families. Working in Mammoth and living in Benton didn't seem feasible ten years ago, and the road wasn't always open during storms.

Today, the road from Benton across to Crowley Lake is open year round, and there are a growing number of residents who carpool together to county jobs in Mammoth. There is a growing population in the three small valley communities and a new school is planned for Chalfant. The land isn't entirely full of hay fields in this day and age, and the price per acre has leapt up \$4,000 (from July 2004 to July 2005).

However, for the time being it's still a place where the cattle outnumber the people and the deer graze through the fields, where open land is available and horses come up to the fence to visit. —MT