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NATIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Buyers in New Mexico Find Views, and Value

By LISA CHAMBERLAIN

LAS CRUCES, N.M.

STANDING outside his newly built house 10 miles east of here, Joe Martin-Howell threw open the front door. There was no grand staircase or large sculpture. Instead, a visitor's eyes went directly to a 16-by-8-foot picture window looking out to the Organ Mountains — a view so stunning that it might be mistaken for a stage set.

Mr. Martin-Howell built the house for himself and his wife, Donna, both originally from Arizona, after they had lived in Las Cruces for five years. The couple are brokers at Steinborn GMAC Real Estate and run an independent residential development company that builds in the foothills of the Organ Mountains, an area known as Talavera. So they knew exactly where to situate their custom-built home.

“This lot actually sat for a while, because from the road, you couldn't really see how great the views are,” Mr. Martin-Howell said. “One day I walked up onto the lot and decided right then this was the spot for us.”

While it is outside the Las Cruces city limits and somewhat hidden behind “A” Mountain (which stands for “agriculture,” and is owned by New Mexico State University), the Talavera area has experienced rapid development in the last few years, as wealthier home buyers take advantage of the large lots and mountain views.

The nearly year-round sunshine here in southern New Mexico, about 300 miles south of Santa Fe, doesn't hurt, either.

The couple's 3,600-square-foot home is in keeping with others being built in the area. It has four bedrooms, four bathrooms and a three-car garage — one part of which is large enough for their 40-foot recreational vehicle.

The home's layout is long and rectangular and takes full advantage of the views. In the master bedroom on one end (complete with a “morning kitchen,” consisting of a small refrigerator and coffee bar, off the master bathroom), the family rooms and kitchen in the middle and guest rooms on the other end, each window offers a different angle on the Organ Mountains and surrounding desert landscape.

The total cost, including the land, was less than \$500,000. “When people come from Arizona or Southern California, they are amazed at the bang for the buck you get here,” Mr. Martin-Howell said.

Mrs. Martin-Howell, who was a nurse for 27 years before joining her husband in the real estate business, added, “We like to sit and watch the coyotes chase rabbits.”

The couple are among an increasing number of people who are looking for a less congested but growing part of the country — and finding it in Las Cruces. Mr. Martin-Howell compares Las Cruces to Phoenix back in the 1960s,

when that city still felt like a small town but was on the cusp of extraordinary growth.

The warm, dry weather and the beauty of the surrounding mountains are big draws to the entire area, not just Talavera. Since 2000, the population of Las Cruces proper has increased by 10,000, according to the [Census Bureau](#), and Doña Ana County, which includes the city, now has a total population just shy of 200,000.

But rapid growth in greater Las Cruces, while mostly considered a positive development for an area where 25 percent of the population lives at or below the poverty line, is beginning to alarm some people.

“Talavera will be completely built out within three to four years,” said Kevin Bixby, executive director of the Southwest Environmental Center, an education and advocacy organization. “Now the city is currently considering annexing 6,000 acres just north of Talavera at the base of the Organ Mountains, and permitting 25,000 new homes. That would double the population of Las Cruces. And the Spaceport tax just passed.”

Voters in Doña Ana County recently approved, by fewer than 300 votes, a \$130 million sales tax that will help build the Spaceport, a space tourism venture proposed by [Richard Branson](#), founder of the Virgin Group. The proposed site is 45 minutes north of the city and would bring even more development — along with suborbital flights costing \$200,000 a ride.

“People are wondering where the water is going to come from, how we’re going to deal with all the traffic,” said Mr. Bixby, who also lives in Talavera. Unlike a vast majority of homes there, his has about half of its electricity provided by solar panels.

“As for Talavera, it’s a great place to live, but the way it’s been developed is not very environmentally sound,” he said. “If growth is going to continue at this pace, that is going to have to change.”

Terrence Moore, the city manager of Las Cruces, said the annexation would actually add 4,000 acres to 2,000 that have already been annexed by the city. The number of homes will not be determined until the annexation is approved, he said. “There are going to be public hearings, and the City Council will offer whatever direction they see fit in terms of whether the annexation should go forward,” he said.

Gene and Tracy Alexander and their children, Jordan, 12, and Hannah, 10, live in a 2,960-square-foot home on five acres in the foothills of the Organ Mountains. Mr. Alexander moved his family here for a job in the health care industry, while Mrs. Alexander runs a Quiznos sandwich franchise that the couple own. They bought their four-bedroom, two-bath house for \$311,000 in 2002.

“The whole back side of the house looks onto the Organ Mountains,” Mr. Alexander said. “I’ve got a lot of pictures of the sunrise over the mountains. It’s always changing, when the thunderstorms are in or from a dusting of snow. You can’t beat it.”

Doug and Debbie Watters agree. They moved to Las Cruces two years ago from Borrego Springs, Calif., near Palm Springs, after visiting friends in the area. The couple sold a resort community they owned and operated in order to retire early. (She is 48 and he is 51.) Their dream home is under construction in Talavera, and they hope to move in this summer.

The couple are building a 3,200-square-foot four-bedroom home and three-car garage on two and a half acres. They

chose an architectural style known as Santa Fe, with a flat roof and adobelike characteristics, and Saltillo tiles, a Mexican style of hand-painted floor and wall tile.

Instead of having a separate living room and family room, Mrs. Watters decided to create one great room with a fireplace and a television area that stretches down to the kitchen. The couple are also building a pool. The total cost, including the land, is about \$600,000.

Mr. Watters said they chose Talavera because the desert area still feels as if it is outside of town even though it is within a 15-minute drive of Las Cruces shops and restaurants and just 45 minutes from El Paso, Tex. As head of the local Hog Club, a group of people who ride [Harley-Davidson](#) motorcycles, Mr. Watters liked the feel of the open desert but needed his home to be accessible by paved roads, many of which were not here only a few years ago.

“We were up there yesterday,” Mr. Watters said. “It’s just like heaven. Over the last couple of days they put up the posts and beams that frame the mountain view, and it’s breathtaking.”

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