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# Mesa's master-planned Dobson Ranch grapples with middle age

Happy 40th, Dobson Ranch



The Dobson Ranch community in Mesa. Dobson Ranch is celebrating its 40th anniversary.

PHOTO BY: Tom Tingle/The Republic

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### The ranch at a glance

**Origins:** Dobson Ranch dates to 1886, when Wilson Wesley Dobson began raising cattle, obtaining water rights that exist to this day and are used to fill the neighborhood lakes.

**Developer:** American Continental Homes, owned by Charles Keating.

**First model opened:** October 1973.

By Gary Nelson

The Republic | azcentral.com

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If you wanted to tell the story of Arizona using one 2,000-acre piece of real estate, Dobson Ranch would be as good a piece as any.

In the blink of history's eye, it was transformed from raw desert to cattle ranch to master-planned suburban utopia, following Arizona's swift arc from rusticity to modernity.

Now, as Dobson Ranch notes its 40th anniversary, it mirrors much of Arizona in another way: It faces the challenge of remaining relevant as a middle-age community amid competition from any number of areas that are newer, fresher, hipper.

As summer turned to fall in 1973, the Watergate scandal was boiling in

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**Acres:** About 2,000, bounded roughly by Loop 101, Guadalupe Road, Alma School Road and U.S. 60. Excludes the Park Place development, which also falls within those borders.

**Residents:** About 5,000 homes and 15,000 residents.

**Amenities:** About 65 acres of common areas and facilities, including seven lakes, three rec centers, four swimming pools and numerous playgrounds.

**City facilities:** The 18-hole Dobson Ranch Golf Course is Mesa's only municipal golf course; the city also operates a full-service branch library, a fire station and a police substation in the neighborhood. The police station will be moving this fall to a new building north of U.S. 60.

Washington and the Middle East teetered on the brink of full-scale war.

But in tranquil southwest Mesa, builders were wrapping up work on the first Dobson Ranch model homes, which would go on display in October.

A large master-planned community was a bold thing to try in Mesa, which in 1970 had barely surpassed 63,000 people in the U.S. census.

Still, that was nearly double the 1960 count, and it was obvious the little city was on the cusp of a breathtaking growth spurt.

One developer who took note was Charles H Keating Jr., head of the American Continental Corp. Keating set his sights on land owned since the 1880s by the ranching Dobson family.

In a 2002 interview with *The Arizona Republic*, Keating recalled sitting with Dobson family members around their farmhouse table in 1971 and dickering for 2,000 acres.

"We agreed to give them a million dollars down," Keating said. "I don't remember the (total) price, and we weren't sure we had a million dollars."

Keating raised that amount by selling 100 acres for the future campus of Banner Desert Medical Center, and set to work laying out his community around a series of artificial lakes.

The Dobson home, by the way, still stands and is today known as the Ranch House Restaurant on the city-owned Dobson Ranch Golf Course.

All of this was long before Keating became all but synonymous with the scandalous collapse of the savings-and-loan industry — a scandal that tarred the reputations of several U.S. senators and sent Keating to prison for four years.

One of Dobson Ranch's main streets still bears Keating's name. This didn't sit well with several neighborhood residents, who asked the city to change it after the scandal broke.

Frank Mizner, a former Mesa planner and a Dobson Ranch resident for 26 years, said the neighbors dropped that idea after the city explained all the complications that would ensue.

"Keating for all his faults was a smart guy," Mizner said. "His first major development was the the Lakes in Tempe. He had that concept of a water-based master-planned community. He was aware that the freeway would be extending out this way."

The original idea, Mizner said, was for all of Dobson Ranch's lakes to be contiguous. That would have entailed building at least three bridges on Dobson Road and one on Baseline Road — far too expensive, as it turned out.

But Keating did keep one very important promise, Dobson Ranch resident Dennis Kavanaugh said.

Since moving to the neighborhood in 1982, Kavanaugh has served three stints on the Dobson homeowners association board and two as chairman, in addition to representing the area 13 years on City Council.

Keating saw Dobson Ranch as a city within a city, Kavanaugh said. That meant a variety of housing styles — small and large single-family homes, condos, apartments and commercial areas to provide shopping and jobs.

"We saw too often that the planned communities would start with a plan that looked like Dobson Ranch" but eventually eliminate multifamily housing, Kavanaugh said.

"The developer and the city stayed the course," Kavanaugh said. "It has a mix of housing. ... It has all the elements to live, work and shop close to home."

Kavanaugh said he was drawn to the neighborhood because of its easy access to other parts of the Valley and because its extensive network of paths facilitated his training as a marathon runner.

"It's really a great success story," Kavanaugh said, a success that has been facilitated by a community association with sound fiscal management and a willingness to invest in a rich array of amenities and recreational programs.

Dobson Ranch is not, however, the same neighborhood it was 40 years ago. The young couples who settled there during the Nixon administration are now, in many cases, empty-nesters.

Declining enrollments forced the Mesa school board this year to close Jordan Elementary School, which lies just south of Dobson Ranch in north Chandler, and turn it into a revenue-generating preschool.

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Changing times also have taken a toll on some neighborhood shopping centers. The most notable example is on the northeastern corner of Dobson and Baseline roads, where an aging strip mall has struggled since its anchor, a Bashas' store, closed several years ago.

"We've got a lot of vacant commercial space around Dobson Ranch, as a lot of Mesa does," Mizner said. "You get these empty spaces and it's a real challenge what to do with those."

Kavanaugh said the Bashas' plaza is particularly problematic because the units are owned by numerous parties who would have to agree on renovations. "That center is in the heart of the community and it has been frustrating," Kavanaugh said.

"From my perspective, the design of that center is all wrong," he added. "They need to take it down and re-orient it toward the lake" that sits just north of the property.

Kavanaugh noted that actually has worked on the west side of Dobson, where a strip mall that features Macayo's restaurant is thriving because it plays off the lakefront setting.

Mizner said it also has been difficult for Mesa's overworked code-compliance staff to keep up with issues in Dobson Ranch.

The homeowners association tries, Mizner said, but "it's impossible for HOAs to keep up property values and enforce community standards."

Even so, Dobson is better off with an HOA than some adjacent neighborhoods without one, Mizner said. "I don't think they've aged as well," even though in the early years one neighborhood advertised its proximity to Dobson Ranch while touting the fact that residents wouldn't be bothered by an HOA.

It was the existence of Dobson Ranch that helped fuel spectacular commercial development, including Fiesta Mall, in the late 1970s just north of the freeway in the Fiesta District.

For a variety of reasons, probably including the changing shopping habits of Dobson Ranch residents themselves, much of that commerce dried up over the past decade. Many storefronts remain shuttered.

Now, Mizner and Kavanaugh said, Dobson Ranch could benefit from efforts to revive the Fiesta District as well as the presence of major employers there.

"Mesa Community College isn't going anywhere," Kavanaugh said. "Banner Desert isn't. Those provide great resources for education and jobs."

The continued success of the neighborhood, the two veteran residents and activists said, will depend on the residents themselves.

With lush mature landscaping, sparkling lakes, well-kept community amenities, a diverse housing stock and one of the most transit-friendly locations in the Valley, Wilson Dobson's old place may be more viable than ever.

But for that to continue, Kavanaugh said, "Residents have to be willing to continue to pay for investments in the area."

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