

Electric dreams

Pinal County is on the road to becoming the electric vehicle capital of America

By REBECCA L. RHOADES



TEST DRIVE: The Nikola Tre FCEV cabover is targeted for distances up to 500 miles and is expected to address the majority of the North American regional market, especially use cases where additional freight hauling capacity and quick fueling are required by fleet operators.

In December 2020, just about a year after it broke ground, electric vehicle (EV) manufacturer Lucid Motors announced that it had completed the first phase of its 590-acre manufacturing plant in Casa Grande and that it's on schedule to start mass production of its luxury Lucid Air sedan by the second half of 2021. The well-equipped vehicle features 406 miles of projected range and varies in price from \$87,500 to \$161,500.

In nearby Coolidge, Nikola, an upstart heavy-duty truck maker, is proceeding with construction of its greenfield facility with the goal of making battery electric (BEV) and fuel-cell (FCEV) semis by 2022, followed by hydrogen fuel-cell (HBEV) behemoths in 2023. The first phase of the \$600 million, 1 million-square-foot factory on 430 acres will produce the BEV and FCEV Nikola Tre cabover trucks designed for hauls

of less than 300 miles and 500 miles, respectively. The Nikola Two HBEV semi, will handle long hauls.

Further north, in Maricopa County, ElectraMeccanica announced in March that it would be building an assembly facility and engineering technology center in Mesa. The company produces the Solo, a three-wheeled car/motorcycle hybrid, or electric autocycle, that starts at \$17,499.

The announcement prompted the following statement by Gov. Doug Ducey: "Arizona has fast become the electric vehicle center of America thanks to our robust and growing workforce, vibrant innovation ecosystem and ideal business environment."

EV CLUSTER

With Lucid and Nikola leading the charge, and ElectraMeccanica forming the vertex of an industrial

triangle, Pinal County finds itself at the epicenter of an EV cluster that is expected to rapidly change the landscape of this otherwise quiet low-desert region. "Nobody wants to be the first in an unknown market — the risks are too high. But now we've proven ourselves," says Richard Wilkie, economic development director for the City of Casa Grande. "Lucid was a startup company that could have gone anywhere — the company looked at 60 sites in 13 states — but it chose Casa Grande because we have the workforce and the infrastructure, and land is a lot more affordable here than in the Phoenix metro area."

While Casa Grande and Pinal County in general have been in a holding pattern since 2016, when Lucid first announced its factory site at the Central Arizona Commerce Park, waiting for these manufacturing

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facilities to be completed and start bringing money and workers into the area, the region is now beginning to see the results of this development.

Lucid plans to invest more than \$700 million by 2028, expanding its plant to more than 5 million square feet and generating 4,800 jobs over the next decade. The company currently has approximately 750 employees, many of whom are already being trained at Drive48, a new instructional facility at Central Arizona College in Coolidge. Lucid also is expected to produce \$32 billion in revenue for the city and county over 20 years.

Nikola, which anchors the Inland Port Arizona (IPAZ) improvement project, is expected to create more than 1,800 full-time jobs in the area.

Once commercial production nears onset, other automotive offshoots, such as suppliers and parts manufacturers, are expected to set up shop nearby. Jomi Engineering Group of Canada has already purchased a building in Casa Grande, where it will build roof components for Lucid.

MORE TO COME?

"I anticipate that more EV manufacturing and assembly and

supply chain will start landing in our region," says Elan Vallender, economic development director for the Town of Florence, which is located northeast of Coolidge. Each new job brings new families to the area, which in turn attracts housing, retail and entertainment to the cities in which the companies are located as well as to the surrounding region.

"The Nikola plant is directly on our city border," says Jeff Fairman, economic development manager for the City of Eloy. "Everyone is always talking about boundaries and city limits, but most people don't really care where the city limits are. They simply care about the resources, and we've got them, so we feel pretty good about it. We're already working with some of Nikola's suppliers and businesses that want to be close to them to kind of piggyback on their success, and from a residential standpoint, we're selling homes in Eloy to people who will be working for both Nikola and Lucid, so that's a direct impact to us."

"People with big dreams and big projects are coming to Pinal County, and that's exciting," Fairman adds. "There's never been a better time or a better opportunity — and I've never seen us more prepared to take advantage of that." ■ ■ ■



LUCID AIR

READY FOR MANUFACTURING: Lucid Motors finished construction on AMP-1 in Casa Grande in December. It is the first greenfield, dedicated electric vehicle factory in North America. The company starts production of its Lucid Air this year.

