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Pinal County prepares for influx of thousands of new jobs



BUSINESS NEWS ([HTTPS://AZBIGMEDIA.COM/CATEGORY/BUSINESS/](https://azbigmedia.com/category/business/)) | 31 May | STEVE BURKS
([HTTPS://AZBIGMEDIA.COM/AUTHOR/STEVE-BURKS/](https://azbigmedia.com/author/steve-burks/))

There are nearly 450,000 people living in Pinal County, a mostly rural, sprawling county the size of Connecticut. And each workday, the roads leading out of Pinal County are full of people heading to work.

“The estimate that we’ve heard is that as many as 90,000 people commute out of Pinal County to work in the metro areas, Tucson and Phoenix,” said Coolidge city manager Rick Miller. “Our hope is that we’ll be able to keep some of those commuters working here, living here and playing here.”

To keep the workers in the county, there first must be jobs. Slowly, companies are planting their flag in Pinal County. Tractor Supply Co. has its West Coast distribution center near Casa Grande, and LKQ, a company that recycles and resells automotive parts and accessories, has a 107,000-square-foot distribution center in the same industrial park.

While those two facilities brought in a couple of hundred jobs, the county is eagerly awaiting a pair of projects that will require up to 5,000 employees — the Lucid Motors plant in Casa Grande and the Nikola Motors plant in Coolidge (<https://azbigmedia.com/pinal-county-on-the-road-to-becoming-an-automotive-manufacturing-juggernaut/>).

“That represents about 5,000 in the workforce, full-time employees,” said Tim Kanavel, economic development director for Pinal County. “Nikola says their employees will make \$80,000 average and Lucid is \$65,000. We’re going to be able to reverse some of that outward flow.”

◀ Those two planned facilities may kick-start a development boom in the county that could push those workforce numbers to close to 10,000 new jobs by 2024. It is expected that supply-chain facilities will follow those two plants, as well as other small manufacturing or research facilities to support Nikola’s hydrogen fuel cell technology and Lucid’s electric vehicle development. If an advanced automotive manufacturing hub is created in the county, it will draw plenty of supporting industries.

“I think we’re going to attract more of the electric vehicle world to this area,” said Jakob Andersen, president and CEO of Saint Holdings, the developer of two industrial parks that will be home to Lucid and Nikola. “When you create a hub, it just creates a chain of auxiliary uses, supply chain uses.”

Before Lucid made Pinal County the site of its first manufacturing facility, it began talks with Central Arizona College on a training program for advanced manufacturing. The CAC, which already had a robust and successful manufacturing curriculum, added classes to provide Lucid the kind of skilled workers that it needed.

That program expanded up and down the I-10, which was dubbed the Arizona Advanced Technology Network, to Maricopa County Community Colleges (chiefly Mesa Community College) and Pima Community College. In fall of 2019, students can begin work on getting their certification in Automated Industrial Technology, a program formed, in large part, because of the impending arrival of Lucid and Nikola.

“What this curriculum will do is broaden the base,” said Joel Millman, workforce development program manager for Arizona@Work Pinal County. “Folks coming out of Mesa Community College, when Lucid is ready to hire or Nikola is ready to hire, or Boeing or Raytheon, those companies will have a broader base to pull from because they’ll know the commonality of the training.”

“For what we do at Arizona@Work, this program assists us in helping educate the workforce in Pinal County that come through our doors. For those that do want to work in that industry, this allows us to guide them to that program.”

Millman and Arizona@Work specialize in helping to assist individuals with barriers to employment. They work closely with economic development officials in the county to stay on top of what kind of jobs will be coming, and what training and skills will potential employees will need to be successful.

“We point them in the right direction when it comes to linking them to employment opportunities,” said Millman. “The hope is that this linkage aligns with targeted industries that is set by our County Board of Supervisors.”

“We have constant conversations about the workforce expectations in the county. I just want to ensure that expectations are aligned and we’ll do everything possible to work with our direct targeted populations.”

The training program may be in place in the community colleges, but the high-tech manufacturing jobs have yet to arrive, as neither Lucid or Nikola have begun construction of their facilities. Millman doesn’t see this as a negative, as his group has prepared the foundation and will be ready to deliver a workforce to those sites and the support and supply-chain facilities that will follow.

“We’ve seen the potential number of jobs and the reality is, until we see the buildings coming out of the ground and those help wanted signs posted, that’s when the dust really starts kicking up,” Millman said. “When the reality hits, we just want to make sure we have a good, solid plan in place, regardless of the numbers.

“Everybody realizes the enormity of the potential that’s in front of us, and the historical potential that we do have. Now’s it’s time and you only have one shot at doing it and I think everybody realizes that. While all of the municipalities have their own strategic planning and their own best interests in mind, I think at the end of the day, Pinal County really bands together.”

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