

DRAFT

SONORAN DESERT CONSERVATION PLAN STEERING COMMITTEE

EDUCATION SESSION # 1

May 22, 1999 (9:00 - 11:30 a.m.)
Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum (Gallery)
2021 N. Kinney Road / Tucson, Arizona, 85743

CONSERVATION PLANS, THE ENDANGERED SPECIES ACT, AND THE CONSTITUTION

The Origins of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan
Chuck Huckelberry, Pima County Administrator

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I want to just thank everyone for coming and I appreciate the attendance. This is one of a series of educational seminars for the steering committee and obviously, anybody and everybody else is welcome to attend these meetings.

Let me talk to you about the conservation plan, and this conservation plan is something that, although it's been billed as something new and different, it's frankly not that new and not that different. It is the coming together and the coalition of a lot of issues and ideas that had the opportunity to germinate into what it is today partly a Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan -- and a part of it is just a general conservation plan of many planning elements that the County has been involved over a number of years. Let me tell you, when I sat down and thought about the origins of the plan, there have really been four factors that have been involved in getting us to where we are today, and I will tell you what they are and come back and talk about each one of them briefly.

The first is growth, the urban growth and urban expansion of Pima County. That is obviously a factor that has pushed us into the mode of conservation.

The second is what I term political will. The political will to take action to advance the principles of conservation.

The third one is this county, city, state and the nation have been blessed with a strong economy, therefore, we have had the capabilities to talk about fundamentals of conservation as opposed to other issues.

The last is the Endangered Species listing of the pygmy-owl that has kind of acted as a catalyst to bring this focus together.

First, let me go back and talk a little bit about growth. As many of you may or may not know, I was born in Tucson a few years ago and the population, in Pima County, when I was born was less than 100,000 people. Today, it is pushing 900,000. So, in the short space of how old I am, this community has grown tremendously.

Urbanization is one of the things we have to think about in Arizona -- and the west is a very popular place to live. We have record migration and have had it year-in and year-out over the last 50 years. I don't anticipate much different in the future with regard to our growth and growth rates.

We know and we can expect and have expected over the last 25 years, about 15,000-20,000 new net residents to be in Pima County -- to live and to work and earn a living; to retire; to do the things that have brought us to this community, its clear skies and mountain views, and the things that people move to Arizona and Tucson for.

They have also, this net population migration, created the need to expand the urban area -- and as we look back at the expansion of the urban area, it is pretty obvious if you take snapshots over time, to see the growing metropolis of Tucson and Pima County and its consumption of land, its consumption of the Sonoran Desert in its urbanization. Our population density, when we talk about density in relationship to land consumption, because there is a relationship there, we could, in fact, have all of our population on just a few square miles very similar to Manhattan, if we had a population density of about 20,000 people per square mile.

We don't like to live that way. The market forces that built this community and basically built the west, have been about a low urban density lifestyle. That low urban density lifestyle has translated into a population density of about 2,200 persons per square mile. Well, it's pretty simple, all you've got to do is do the math. You take 15,000 to 20,000 new residents each year and divide 2,200 into it and you get that every year, year in and year out, we're going to consume anywhere from seven to ten square miles of the Sonoran Desert in expanding urbanization of Eastern Pima County.

So that growth, and that recognition of growth, and the recognition that some of us had, that we used to drive for 10 minutes and be out in the desert but now it takes us 30 minutes to drive and be out in the desert -- that's the consequences of this urban expansion, this free market economy that lets people basically live where they want to live and live in the style that they can afford.

So urban growth, that consumption of the Sonoran Desert, is one of those factors that's been at play for probably 20 or 30 years. It's becoming more acute just in the last ten years. People begin to recognize it because like you, sometimes as I get older I forget things and I know what Pima County looked like in 1990 and 1990 is only ten years ago, I can remember that. Well, in Pima County ten years ago the population was 660,000 people, today it's 850,000 people.

That's a 30% increase in one decade. Therefore, we think about that urban growth and that future consumption of the Sonoran Desert, and that is one of the driving forces behind the origins of the conservation plan.

The second one is this thing called political will, and it's important to have the political will to foster a conservation ethic and a conservation plan because it takes some courage to do that. We've had this habit in Pima County -- about every four or five years -- we either talk about growth as being something that's necessary to sustain the economy and should be done at all costs, or we talk about growth as the evil that is destroying the community and the environment and should be stopped at all costs.

So that is translated over the years into this whole discussion about who gets elected, what their philosophies are and everything else. Well, that's a good debate and it sells on t.v. but it does little for the community and little for the environment and little for the economy over the years that I've been in the County and I've been in the County now for 25 years.

I can remember in 1974 when we had Ron Asta and Ron Asta was for controlled growth. I can remember when we had another election a few years later and we went into what we called the business board.

The Board said, "We want to grow." And so back and forth and back and forth and back and forth -- and the only thing real that has ever happened in that debate and discussion was that every year, Pima County grew by 15,000 to 20,000, regardless of how we debated or whether we thought growth was good or bad.

So it takes the political will to recognize that whether you are one side or another, you basically better begin to think about coming to grips with solving the problem because those 15,000 to 20,000 people are still coming here each and every year.

We've had a Board who have had that political will to move forward, have the courage to say it's time to do something and it's time to do something right, let's bring everybody in, talk about it, discuss it, debate the issues and we can reasonably debate and disagree but in the end we ought to come to what we want this community to look like and settle it.

It requires that longstanding political will to make a choice to change because if we have these swings of philosophy back and forth, the only thing that really suffers in the long run is true, final positive direction and planning.

We go one direction one year, we take another direction another year so this political will is very, very important, political stability in that discussion is also very, very important to move forward. That's the second area.

Strong economy: I was at a meeting this morning with a free breakfast served and we talked a lot about that free breakfast but during the free breakfast discussion, everyone circulated raffle tickets so there is no free breakfast, no free lunch and there is no free conservation.

You have to pay for it and you have to figure out how to pay for it and I can tell you, it is much easier to talk conservation, and the taxation that is going to be necessary to implement conservation measures when in fact the economy is strong and healthy and that there are tax revenues flowing into the treasury, whether it's the County, city, state or the nation.

Though strong economies basically allow us to afford conservation, and we've been fortunate in the last five to seven years to have a very strong economy locally, in the state as well as the nation, so all we can do is hope that those prognosticators of the economy and the nation and those who keep the money supply in balance continue to do a good job so we can have reasonable economic expansion to be able to afford conservation. That is also a factor that has put us in a position of where we are today.

Finally, the whole thing that got all this stirred up and moving in a direction was the Endangered Species listing of the pygmy-owl and many of you attended some of the forums, either in costume or in person, on the pygmy-owl.

That particular issue was just symptomatic of what is occurring with urban land consumption, the loss of natural resources, the issue on the political will and the collision of the economy: in other words, the threat to the local economy that the pygmy-owl is going to shut down all building in Eastern Pima County. That particular listing was the catalyst that basically got people thinking about how we ought to act as a community and in issues of conservation.

Those four things in combination set the stage for where we are today with the issues of conservation plans. We've had a lot of other discussions along the way. We've had a Board of Supervisors who took office in 1997 that said we ought to do something about growth, and set the staff off to working and thinking. Independent groups are also working on issues, and that all came together in 1998 to foster the first release a conservation plan as you've seen it, as it has been discussed and when you asked to be placed on a Steering Committee to guide its development over the next 24 months.

It has been called new and revolutionary, different and all those things but it's not any of those. This Plan is a steady state and continuation of some of the practices that have gone on for many, many years.

Let me tell you why I believe that and think that. When we talk about the six elements of the conservation plan, it is pretty straightforward.

The first element is called Ranch Conservation and you are going to have some educational seminars on it later. This element is trying to keep ranchers ranching to help preserve rural areas of this community so they do not get fractionalized and destroyed by what we call "unregulated development." That is an area that the County has had an interest in for about 12 years now.

If you remember, former Supervisor David Yetman in 1986 or 1987, he had the revolutionary idea, as a politician, to raise the tax rate of the Flood Control District by about 50% and he did that for one reason and one reason only. It was because the Empire and Cienega Ranches were threatened to be sold by the mining company that had those ranches and if they were sold, there was a planned community in the Cienega Valley Basin for 100,000 new residences.

Now those 100,000 new residences would have urbanized that basin, cause increased flooding and taking all of the water out of the basin that naturally flows into the Tucson Basin, all of those things.

For 12 years, the County has had an interest in Ranch Conservation and the city has recently has had an interest in Ranch Conservation with the purchase of Bellota Ranch and it's an idea that is catching on. We think that it's an important element. It's nothing that is particularly new, but it needs to be codified and needs to be in our comprehensive plan.

Historic and Cultural Preservation -- we've had an interest in that for a number of years and we need to make that one of the focal points of this community because the heritage and culture of the west requires some protection and preservation. We believe quite strongly in it.

We talk about another element called Mountain Parks. Now Pima County has only been interested in Mountain Parks for 70 years. The very first acquisition of this area of Tucson Mountain Park occurred in 1929. The last acquisition occurred just one week ago when the Board of Supervisors expanded Tucson Mountain Park by adding about another 300 acres into the east front of the Tucson Mountains going down into the urban area.

Riparian Protection -- well because of our need to drink water we have basically pumped the Tucson Basin and destroyed about 90% of the existing riparian vegetation that used to be in this basin. The riparian areas in the southwest are some of the most important with regard to biodiversity and the things that make the Sonoran Desert the Sonoran Desert. It is the oasis of the Sonoran Desert.

Our Riparian Protection element is designed to talk about bringing back rivers that have long since been pumped dry, dumped on and encroached upon back to a more natural environment so that the folks in the urban area as well those out in the outlying areas can enjoy a natural riparian environment that may come in and bisect the urban community, we believe that is extremely important since water is a key, water is important and we need to work with our neighbors across the street on the issue of water and how to reintroduce water to these riparian systems to restore and protect them.

The other areas deal with the Endangered Species. The Endangered Species Act focuses on the pygmy-owl, and not just the pygmy-owl, but a whole series of threatened and endangered species that could or might be listed and as we urbanize and destroy habitat.

We need to take some protective actions to decide that we need that which is most important. Not all of it, we can't do that but we can in the biological corridors and in the critical and sensitive elements bring to the forefront, introduce real science in the land protection and the protection of these particular areas so that we have a rational basis in order to proceed with reasonable regulation and/or if necessary, acquisition.

Now, your role as members of the steering committee is to help us make all those decisions and help the Board implement long term policy, long term procedures that will lead to what we call a sustainable plan, not a flash in the pan kind of idea about conservation but something that can withstand the test of time -- withstand the test of time with regard to legislative actions and most importantly, withstand the test of time with regard to the inevitable swings in our economy which will ultimately occur.

Now is the opportunity within the next 18 months to put in place, a permanent, long term, stable, sustainable conservation plan for Pima County and that's your charge. That is what you are here for.

We need your help, but in offering your help you need to go through a series of sessions that you are going through, and we hope you all attend every one of the educational seminars because each of you, in your own areas, are experts. You are an expert on something, and what we need is for you to be more expert on everything so that you can reach reasonable balance and conclusions and make those same recommendations to the Board of Supervisors.

Thank you very much.