



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE
McDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING – MINUTES**

Wednesday, February 7, 2024
Granite Reef Senior Center – Room 1
1700 N. Granite Reef Road
Scottsdale, AZ 85257

PRESENT: Chairperson Steve Coluccio, Vice-Chair Kerry Olsson, Commissioners Marsha Lipps, Mark Hackbarth, Laurie LaPat-Polasko (MS Teams), Marsha Lipps, Jeffrey Smith, and Savannah Engelking

STAFF: Bridget Blixt, Chief Operating Officer; Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director; Scott Hamilton, Senior Trails Planner; Gina Kirklin, Finance Director

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Coluccio called the meeting to order at 5:01 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as noted above.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no members of the public who wished to speak.

4. McDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY UPDATE

Ms. Bridget Blixt, Chief Operating Officer, gave an update on the activities of the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy. As part of her presentation, she talked about invasive species mitigation goals; Expedition Days, scheduled for March; the Steward recognition ceremony, scheduled for April 4, 2024; and Tour de Scottsdale, which will include three Olympian cyclists and non-profit agency participants. She noted that the official announcement regarding the Conservancy's new CEO will be coming out next week.

5. PROTECT THE PRESERVE PROCESS UPDATE

Staff will provide an update on the process to review costs and programs to protect the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, including:

- Council and Task Force Process update

Mr. Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director, gave a summary of the Protect and Preserve Scottsdale Task Force recommendation. The task force will present to City Council February 27, 2024, at 4:00 p.m., during a work-study session. Task Force Chair Cynthia Wenstrom and City Treasurer Sonia Andrews will make the presentation and be available for discussion. Commissioners are welcome to attend the meeting; however, public comments will likely be limited to five speakers. Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the results of the Citizen Survey, noting that staff can ask the survey company for clarification if Commissioners have specific questions about the survey.

A. Draft letter from Chair to City Council – Supporting Task Force recommendation for Preserve funding

Mr. Ekblaw said that the draft letter to City Council was modeled after the one sent by the Parks and Recreation Commission but focuses on the Preserve. He noted that Ms. Kirklin and Chair Coluccio have made minor edits. He asked for input on tone and content of the letter.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to make comments. Discussion ensued regarding why the exact dollar amount of \$3.5 million and an exact percentage are not referenced in the letter and whether stating a specific number would make the Commission's recommendation contingent upon that number. Mr. Ekblaw explained that the recommendation is to go with the 0.15%, but City Council has the ability to change that percentage. He said it can be emphasized in the letter that the Commission supports a specific range. Ms. Kirklin added that the letter pertains to one motion the Task Force made; there was a separate motion that included the allocation. The initial request is that City Council approve reducing and extending the sales tax. A second conversation would be about how to allocate those dollars if the sales tax is extended. It was noted that if City Council makes adjustments, that direction would be brought back to the Commission for additional comments.

COMMISSIONER SMITH MOVED TO APPROVE THE DRAFT LETTER FROM THE CHAIR TO CITY COUNCIL, SUPPORTING THE TASK FORCE RECOMMENDATION FOR PRESERVE FUNDING. COMMISSIONER ENGELKING SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR OLSSON, AND COMMISSIONERS ENGELKING, HACKBARTH, LaPAT-POLASKO, LIPPS, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

B. Recommendation to City Council for existing 0.15% (2004) tax annual review

Mr. Ekblaw noted that the Task Force recommendation suggests that the tax is still needed for at least a period of time because debt service is being funded out of that tax, and it suggests that City Council consider the opportunity to terminate the tax should it be deemed no longer needed. As part of the process, the City Treasurer would provide annual updates to the Commission and City Council on the status of the funds. Mr. Ekblaw explained that there has been citizen concern that tax dollars are being accumulated with no purpose, but those funds are being put into a reserve to ensure that funds are available to pay debt service in the event of a bad sales tax collection year. If the funds were not available, debt service would have to be paid from the General Fund.

Commissioner Hackbarth asked if something could be added to the final phrase stating

something to the effect of “if this tax is no longer needed,” “for the original approved purposes,” or “for payment of debt.” Discussion ensued regarding the request. Mr. Ekblaw expressed concern about amending the document, noting that it would be strongest if the document matches what is being sent by the Task Force. Ms. Kirklin reviewed that there exists approximately \$300 million worth of principle debt, and the City is locked into the existing structure until 2027 or 2028. She mentioned that in 2021, the City refunded over \$100 million of City debt, which is saving approximately \$1 million per year. Once the payoff window is closer, they can evaluate whether or not there is enough accumulated sales tax to pay it off early.

COMMISSIONER SMITH MOVED TO APPROVE THE RECOMMENDATION TO CITY COUNCIL FOR THE EXISTING 0.15% (2004) TAX ANNUAL REVIEW. COMMISSIONER LIPPS SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED FIVE (5) TO TWO (2) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR OLSSON, AND COMMISSIONERS ENGELKING, LIPPS, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. COMMISSIONERS HACKBARTH AND LaPAT-POLASKO DISSENTED.

6. ERP (ECOLOGICAL RESOURCE PLAN) UPDATE AND SCHEDULE

From a public comment, Carla asked that the 1998 report “Fragmentation of Habitat in the North Scottsdale Area” be included with the ERP. She talked about the history behind the report, which came about when land north of the State Trust land was threatened with being sold for development. The report focuses on the importance of maintaining continuity between the State Trust land and the National Forest land to the north, which is an important issue because politics creates policy, and there is no guarantee that the national forest land will remain permanently protected.

Mr. Scott Hamilton, Senior Trails Planner, reviewed the Ecological Resource Plan (ERP) working draft and asked for input from the Commission.

Extensive discussion ensued. Commissioners asked clarifying questions, made comments on content already in the document, and recommended amendments to the document, including:

- With the input of key partners, ensure the document is a description of what is in the Preserve and how to monitor its health.
- Use the ERP as the basis for RFPs to do work.
- Apply comprehensive expertise to the scope of resource studies. Techniques from the National Park Service’s guide to monitoring the Sonoran Desert Network (SODN) should be used and keystone species considered. Ongoing input from McDowell Sonoran Conservancy and Arizona Game and Fish should be considered.
- Include monitoring of human impact on the ecology.
- Include changes in the environment as part of the Preserve health assessment.
- Include a requirement to maintain one-year and five-year reports. Consider using an outside consultant for the five-year report.
- Focus resource studies on monitoring and not intermixing management actions.
- Maintain public involvement and education and include Scottsdale residents in monitoring efforts.
- Include a requirement to monitor groundwater.
- Include more detail in the explanation of the adaptive management process

under section four.

- Add language to identify and evaluate the Preserve's efficiency as a wildlife corridor.
- Use the term "keystone species" more and outline what makes a good indicator.
- A statement outlining why each indicator species is being included should be added to the ERP.
- Include a public information element in the annual report on the ERP.
- Include information on the process for making management changes under the adaptive management section.

A comment was made about the importance of phenology because the information is included in the National Data Base. Mr. Hamilton reiterated that the ERP will be a living document that will continue to be analyzed as needed and as opportunities change. Commissioners will forward additional questions and comments to staff.

7. STAFF REPORTS

- Annual Report Update

Mr. Ekblaw noted that the corrections to the 2024 Commission Annual Report regarding attendance have been made.

- 128th Street

Mr. Ekblaw shared photographs of the signs installed by the Scottsdale Transportation department near 128th Street in the Gooseneck area, identifying the area as being for construction and emergency vehicle access and not maintained for public vehicle access. He will follow up with the Planning department on the timeline for Story Rock's development and provide an update at a future meeting.

8. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS, AND AGENDA ITEMS

All dates listed are tentative and subject to amendment:

- Regular Meetings
 - March 7
 - Future One-Time Preserve Costs Review
 - Rock Climbing Plan Refinements Update
 - April 4; May 2; June 6

Mr. Ekblaw will send out a survey to Commissioners about the potential conflict on April 4th.

9. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Chair Coluccio congratulated staff on the award of a grant for \$193,500 from the Department of Forestry and Fire Management for the continued invasive plants mitigation. Mr. Hamilton noted that the grant received last year has funded work done since last spring that is continuing now, and the new grant is expected to fund an additional 18 months of work.

10. ADJOURNMENT

COMMISSIONER HACKBARTH MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. VICE-CHAIR OLSSON SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR OLSSON, AND COMMISSIONERSENGELKING, HACKBARTH, LaPAT-POLASKO, LIPPS, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

With no further business to discuss, being duly moved and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 6:57 p.m.

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