



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE
MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES
Wednesday, November 18, 2021
Community Design Studio
7506 E. Indian School Road
Scottsdale, AZ 85251**

PRESENT: Chairperson Cynthia Wenstrom, Vice-Chair Laurie LaPat-Polasko, Commissioners Steve Coluccio, Mark Hackbarth, Marsha Lipps, Kerry Olsson, and Jeffrey Smith

STAFF: Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director; Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager

GUEST: Justin Owen, Executive Director, McDowell Sonoran Conservancy

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Wenstrom called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as noted above.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no public comments submitted.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of the Regular Meeting minutes of Regular Meeting minutes of November 3, 2021

This item was tabled.

5. 128th STREET TRANSPORTATION PLAN DESIGNATION

Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director, gave a presentation, reviewing the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission letter forwarded to the Transportation Commission in September 2021, that a portion of 128th Street be redesignated from local collector to only emergency access with path/trail corridor where it passes through the Preserve. He said that the key points made by the MSPC were: that this is an important wildlife corridor in the gooseneck area that serves as a connection between the County Regional Park and Tonto National Forest and that it is a

key objective of the Preserve to protect the habitat and wildlife species; habitats and connectivity are often impacted by transportation corridors and that those corridors can be a contributing factor for fragmentation and animal mortality. He noted that since the MSPC's initial recommendation in 2015, connection along 118th Street to Rio Verde has been put in place, which alleviates concern about connectivity in that area. Another concern expressed by the Commission included the public path/trail and whether it was for daytime use only. He said that a city waterline is in that area and appropriate wildlife crossing structures could be used to address wildlife crossing needs.

Mr. Ekblaw said that the Transportation Commission is interested in a joint meeting with the MSPC and that they suggested considering the potential for a wildlife crossing at Rio Verde Drive as part of the discussion.

It was noted that Justin Owen from the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy submitted a public comment supporting the redesignation of 128th Street.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Commissioners expressed interest in eliminating the section talking about leaving a path/trail through the area for daytime use and in ensuring that a wildlife friendly ground covering be used on the emergency access area. Mr. Ekblaw said that police and fire have recommended an all-weather surface road and have indicated that they would need only approximately 20 feet of the available 55-foot wide area for their vehicles to pass.

Mr. Owen said that designating that area as an emergency access road is a top priority of the Conservancy. Currently, the road is open for traffic at all hours, affecting wildlife movement. He said that it is especially important to make the area more wildlife friendly as soon as possible, because of ongoing development in surrounding areas.

Mr. Ekblaw noted that Transportation Commission expects to send their recommendation to City Council in February or March of 2022. The MSPC recommendation will move forward as part of the Transportation Commission package.

Discussion ensued regarding the path through the gooseneck and the emergency access ground surface. They were interested in ensuring that the ground surface is of a natural material. Mr. Ekblaw explained that ground surface will be discussed as part of the budget and construction process at a later time. It was consensus of the Commission to remove the section in the document that references "Path/Trail" and the associated language located under the third bullet point.

CHAIR WENSTROM MOVED TO RECOMMEND THE DESIGNATION OF THE HIGHLIGHTED SECTION OF 128TH STREET FROM IT'S CURRENT DESIGNATION AS A MINOR COLLECTOR TO A NEW DESIGNATION AS AN EMERGENCY ACCESS ONLY, IN THE AREA WHICH PASSES THROUGH THE SCOTTSDALE MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE. THE SECTION OF THE RECOMMENDATION REGARDING PATH/TRAIL WILL BE REMOVED. RECOMMENDED GROUND COVERING WILL BE ALL WEATHER ACCESS, UTILIZING AN APPROPRIATE WILDLIFE CROSSING STRUCTURE OR SIMILAR DESIGN ELEMENTS TO SENSITIVELY ADDRESS WILDLIFE CROSSING NEEDS. COMMISSIONER HACKBARTH SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR WENSTROM, VICE-CHAIR LAPAT-POLASKO, AND

COMMISSIONERS COLUCCIO, HACKBARTH, LIPPS, OLSSON, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

6. POLICY PROCESS UPDATE AND FOLLOW-UP

Staff will provide an update of the following Policy process items:

A. Follow-up on Policy Item #1 – Land acquisition

Mr. Ekblaw recalled City Council's direction to the Commission to:

- Prioritize potential additions to the Preserve to determine acquisition options with available projected funds
- Review Preserve maintenance needs
- Evaluate a perpetual maintenance fund
- Explore funding options, including the extension of the two-tenths of one percent sales tax currently dedicated to the Preserve land acquisition

Presentation to Council is tentatively targeted for January 11, 2022. Direction from Council at the time of the presentation will determine whether the Commission has until fall of 2022 or fall of 2024 to complete research before going to a public vote. Mr. Ekblaw noted that timing is good to present a financial proposal to Council, because the City Manager and City Treasurer are currently reviewing the City's overall long-term strategies.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the Preserve Commission cost projection worksheet, noting that he merged the recurring non-annual numbers into the recurring non-annual column and added some numbers to the land acquisition column.

He explained that invasive plants were categorized under the capital expenditures instead of annual expenditures because the existing sales tax dollars could be advanced sooner, prioritizing areas where mitigation is currently needed.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the summary slide of land acquisition, focusing on the northern 3,600 acres of State Trust lands, which are estimated to range from \$300,000 to \$500,000 per acre in an auction process. He reminded the Commission that an additional approximately 33 percent of debt service needs to be calculated into the per acreage cost. He noted that available dollars are estimated to be approximately \$70.4 million by FY 2025/26. The number would be lower if dollars are spent within prior years. The recommendation to Council will include a range, up to the \$70 million, using existing taxes and will note that anything more would require a new funding source. Staff will work with Chair Wenstrom and Mr. McKeighan to finalize the presentation format and incorporate amendments agreed upon by the Commission before going to City Council.

Discussion ensued regarding the cost projections. It was the consensus of the Commission to present Council with a low/medium/high range, noting that the MSPC is recommending the middle number.

- ### **B. Follow-up on Policy Items 2.A-2.F. Maintenance and Operations; Education, Research, Corridor Protection, Invasive Plants, Wildland Fuels, Restoration, Trails, Trailheads, Cultural Resources Cost projections**

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the updated Preserve Commission cost projection worksheet. Commissioners made recommendations as follows:

2.A. Daily Preserve Operations and Maintenance

Mr. Ekblaw summarized the historic projected costs, volunteer support costs, and projected management cost, totaling an estimated \$1.225 to \$1.250 million.

Commissioners were in support of the projections.

2.B. Sonoran Desert Research and Education

Mr. Owen gave an update on the Conservancy's education and outreach program. The goal of the Conservancy is to maintain the Preserve in perpetuity. He said that the public and young people will create an understanding and appreciation of the Preserve that will ensure the Preserve is protected for future generations. Programs such as Expedition Days aligns with the school curriculum. It is hoped that at some point every third grade student will be able to go on a field trip through the Preserve. Opportunities to engage students in all grade levels through virtual learning could be explored in the future. He noted that the school districts fund programs at the schools, including the teacher education program. Bringing youth to the Preserve is a priority for the City as part of the education program. Mr. Owen talked about the importance of offering multi-generational education programs through senior centers and family programming. Currently formal programs have been available through the anniversary celebrations, Citizen Science activities, at libraries, and by participating in special events. He mentioned that the City is approximately 33 percent open space, including the Preserve. He opined that education programs not only benefit the Preserve, but benefit the awareness of open spaces throughout the city and that everyone has a role in protecting these areas for future generations.

Mr. Owen reviewed costs associated with education, which amount to approximately \$733,000 per year. With an offset for the stewards, the cost for the Conservancy to operate the education program is approximately \$400,000 annually. If an outside business were to take over, it would come to approximately \$3.2 million. The Conservancy supports the idea of a competitive bid process and encourages renewal every five years.

Mr. Ekblaw said that whatever tax dollars are pursued will be managed through the City's annual budget process, including an annual priorities recommendation from the Commission to City Council.

Mr. Owen said that the bottom range number would maintain efforts currently being made by the Conservancy but would not ensure that the Preserve is ecologically healthy. If the process goes to 2024, the top priority will be to complete the ERP. He added that the Conservancy supports the engagement of outside partners for management of invasive plants as well as marketing.

Discussion ensued regarding projected low, medium and high ranges and finding additional funding sources. Commissioners expressed interest in holding a work study session to further discuss the Research and Education budget.

2.C. Corridor Protection

Mr. Ekblaw noted that the \$10 million number is a placeholder. He suggested considering the Corridor as part of the Trailhead and Trails Master plan. He said that staff would be concerned with putting a low/medium/high number on each item when the science is unknown at this time and there are potentially other opportunities for funding.

Commissioners were in support of leaving the \$10 million as a placeholder.

2.D. Invasive Plants, Wildland Fire Mitigation, and Restoration Projects

Mr. Ekblaw said that for invasive plant management, staff is confident in the range of 50 to 200 acres and targeting certain species initially, with the expectation of growing over time and in budgeting for annual cost. The intent is to have a long-term program that is managed annually. A small percent of the work will be done by volunteers, but the bulk of the work will require professional crews. Additional dollars are being targeted for wildland fire protection. Mr. Ekblaw said that he is confident in the projected number, because he anticipates that there will be grant opportunities. In future budgeting processes strategies and priorities would be considered and as dollars are available through grant processes, for example, budgeted dollars could be interchanged between invasive plant management and fire mitigation. The projected budget anticipates a one-time restoration spread out over a five- to ten- year program.

Commissioners were in support of the projections.

2.E. Trailhead and Trails Master Plans

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the Trailhead and Trails Master Plan projections. The rough estimate is \$10 to \$12 million, which would cover trail work and boundary control. An additional long-range estimate of \$10 million was added to cover corridor protection and master plans, bringing the total to \$22 million.

Discussion ensued regarding whether the additional \$10 million is justified, since the majority of trailhead work has been completed. Mr. Ekblaw explained that the first \$12 million would cover an approximate ten-year period and the additional \$10 million is a long-term hold on approximately \$500,000 per year. The long-term amount could be left out and put in a future bond election.

Mr. Ekblaw confirmed that the projection includes shaded amphitheaters, a restroom at Sunrise, water conversions at Tom's Thumb and Fraesfield, and resurfacing at some equestrian areas. Daily maintenance and parking lot resurfacing would be covered under different programs.

Commissioners supported the \$12 million estimate and removal of the \$10 million long-term projection.

2.F. Cultural Master Plan

Mr. Ekblaw said that the annual projection was intended to be spread out over 20 years but could be higher if the Commission wants to accelerate the project to be completed in ten years. The projection includes a one-time cost for the Brown's Ranch site, which is projected to be between \$200,000 and \$400,000.

Discussion ensued regarding estimated cost and timing. Commissioner Hackbarth noted that \$33,000 per year would cover the bare minimum and would include the use of volunteers to do survey work on areas that have not been surveyed, because they were purchased as private land and surveys were not required at the time of purchase. Surveying will help with prioritization. He said that the areas are not threatened, which means it is safe to do the work over a period of time.

Commissioners discussed the idea of offering interpretive education to the public for sites that are already known and preserving the anonymity of sites that are more culturally sensitive.

Mr. Owen commented that cultural site recognition could garner great support from stakeholders.

Consensus of the Commission was to raise the annual projection to a range of \$50,000 to \$75,000 and accelerate the work.

- C. Preparation for Council Presentation - The Commission will discuss the City Council presentation to be made at a Work Study Session with the Council in December or January.

Mr. Ekblaw said that he is comfortable moving forward with the consensus direction that Commissioners provided throughout the discussion.

Mr. Ekblaw explained that the Preserve is included as part of the police and fire departments' service to the City. There is no need to include their services as a separate line item. He will invite police and fire to speak during a future meeting.

7. STAFF REPORTS

Staff will update the Commission on projects, activities, events, and other information relating to the Preserve including but not limited to the following:

Pima Dynamite Trailhead Update

Mr. Hamilton gave an update on the progress of Pima Dynamite Trailhead construction, which is mostly completed. The grand opening was held November 13, 2021. Mayor Ortega was in attendance, Chair Wenstrom and Mr. Owen spoke and the sign honoring Art DeCabooter was unveiled. Mr. Hamilton thanked Lynne Russell for sharing her photographs.

Mr. Ekblaw commended Mr. Hamilton for coordinating grand opening celebration.

Fraesfield Interpretive Trail
October Celebration Dates

8. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS, AND AGENDA ITEMS

All dates listed are tentative and subject to amendment:

- Regular 2022 meetings thru June:
February 3; March 3; April 7; May 5; June 2

9. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Chair Wenstrom asked for a presentation on the policy about naming in the Preserve.

Commissioner Lipps noted that during today's Lunch and Learn, it was mentioned that the next Lunch and Learn would include a discussion about naming in the Brown's Ranch area. Mr. Owen and Mr. Hamilton assured the Commission that they have not been approached regarding naming policies.

10. ADJOURNMENT

COMMISSIONER LIPPS MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. COMMISSIONER COLUCCIO SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR WENSTROM, VICE-CHAIR LAPAT-POLASKO, COMMISSIONERS COLUCCIO, HACKBARTH, LIPPS, OLSSON, 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 8:02 p.m.

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