



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE  
MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION  
SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES  
Thursday, October 14, 2021  
Meeting held electronically**

**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; Bill Murphy, Assistant City Manager

**1. CALL TO ORDER**

Chair Wenstrom called the meeting to order at 4:00 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 September 9, 2021 and September 16, 2021

COMMISSIONER HACKBARTH MOVED TO APPROVE THE SEPTEMBER 9, 2021 MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES. COMMISSIONER SMITH 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.

Commissioner Coluccio noted that Mr. Hamilton should be referred to as Preserve Manager instead of Senior Trails Planner.

Commissioner Olsson questioned why Commissioner discussion was not captured in more detail. Mr. Ekblaw explained that the minutes are written in a summarized form and that an audio recording of the meetings is available on the City's website for those interested in listening to the detailed conversation.

VICE-CHAIR LAPAT-POLASKO MOVED TO APPROVE THE SEPTEMBER 16, 2021 MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION SPECIAL MEETING MINUTES AS

AMENDED. COMMISSIONER LIPPS SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ONE (1) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR WENSTROM, VICE-CHAIR LAPAT-POLASKO, COMMISSIONERS COLUCCIO, HACKBARTH, LIPPS, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. COMMISSIONER OLSSON DISSENTED.

## **5. MCDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY UPDATE**

Justin Owen, McDowell Sonoran Conservancy Executive Director, announced that Mayor Ortega proclaimed October McDowell Sonoran Preserve Month.

October recognitions, honoring the Conservancy's 30th anniversary include:

- October 1997- 100<sup>th</sup> free hike following the dedication Lost Dog Wash, which was the first public trail
- October 2001 - Introduction of the first blue steward T-shirts
- October 2007 – Addition of new educational programs, including Sunset Family Series and Preserve Up Close
- October 2011 – The first 500 Stewards were fully trained
- October 2015 - First Field Institute research symposium

Mr. Owen said that the partnership with Intel using artificial intelligence to identify invasive non-native plants in the Preserve is progressing. Stewards have been able to use drones to identify buffelgrass and fountain grass. He anticipates that the technology will have a positive effect not only on the Preserve, but across the region. He noted that stewards have been spraying priority areas to address the increase in non-native plants resulting from the recent rainfall.

Key species looks help in determining how the entire Preserve ecosystem is working. The fall semi-annual butterfly survey was conducted on September 25, 2021. 9,683 butterflies from 41 different species, including three new species to the Preserve, were identified. Precipitation had positive results on the amphibian surveys, in particular the toad population.

Development of the Expedition Days for 4th graders is continuing in collaboration with SUSD and Mesa School District. Recently the Conservancy partnered with SUSD on the Pathways to Learning Project, which will involve bringing the mobile Expedition Days labs to schools to be used as part of in-person STEM lessons.

The Family Passport program is being replaced with the Sonoran Desert Explorer Guide, offering an opportunity for K-12 students to learn about the Sonoran Desert and species within it. A multi-generational guide will be introduced during the Camino Campana opening on October 31, 2021.

Pathfinders are back at the trailheads and guided hike and bike activities are back in full swing. Two Stewardship 101 classes have been completed and 40 new stewards have completed full training.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions.

Commissioner Olsson said that the Pathfinders are hoping to get started at Pima-Dynamite Trailhead prior to the formal opening date.

Mr. Owen explained that one of the reasons butterflies have been identified as a key indicator for precipitation is to be a guide to following trends. On a normal year with average precipitation

approximately 1,000 butterflies would be seen. Last year, 25 were seen, showing that the lack of precipitation was so heavy that many different species could be affected and additional monitoring was needed. An abundance of butterflies is an indication that the ecosystem is healthy.

## **6. POLICY PROCESS UPDATE**

### **A. Policy Item #2A. Follow-up on Commission questions for Daily Preserve Operations/Maintenance**

Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager, reviewed questions posed by Commissioners during prior meetings. As part of his presentation, he reviewed the approved budget vs. the actual expenditures for FY 2018/19 through FY 2020/21 and FY 2021/22 maintenance and operations projections. Reduced spending was seen in late 2020 and into 2021 due to COVID-19, resulting in the actual spending coming in approximately \$100,000 below budget.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Mr. Hamilton explained that approximately \$40,000 of the \$100,000 reduction was due to the fact that American Conservation Experience (ACE) was not available to do the annual trail maintenance due to the pandemic. Approximately \$30,000 in savings was seen in personnel costs, because Community Services staff was helping with work in the Preserve and their pay was not taken out of the Preserve budget. The remainder of the savings was due to cancelation of steward events, educational events, printing of posters and volunteer training.

Mr. Hamilton said that there are approximately 4.85 FTEs that account for the approximate \$431,000 in Preserve personnel costs. Seventy percent of the staffing at Pinnacle Peak comes from the Pinnacle Peak budget and Community services staff is paid from the Community Services budget. Mr. Murphy, Mr. Ekblaw, and Ruth Johnson's salaries are under the administration and facilities budget.

Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director, said that ACE typically takes care of heavy-duty trail maintenance. Staff and stewards have continued to do light maintenance throughout the COVID period. Although \$40,000 was not spent on trail maintenance last year, Mr. Ekblaw noted that the light maintenance done during COVID means there is no backlog of deferred maintenance and they will not need additional funding for this year.

Bill Murphy, Assistant City Manager, explained that when the Preserve was brought into Community Services Department it was intended to use the resources and support available through that department, which is being reflected in the budget presentation. Mr. Ekblaw clarified that Preserve Funding comes out of the City's General Fund. Preserve Tax dollars are limited to land acquisition and capital improvements.

### **B. Policy Item #2.B. Range of Possible Projected Costs Associated with Sonoran Desert Research and Education**

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the range of possible projected costs associated with Sonoran Desert Research and Education. His presentation included an outline of the language in the Commission policy regarding research and education, which supports education to maintain the Preserve in perpetuity. Education programs have targeted youth education programs, education opportunities for Preserve users, special programs, and special events. The projected annual base cost for education is a range between \$125,000 and \$150,000. Mr. Ekblaw noted that

potential opportunities for matching funds and partnerships have been noted projections that could leverage the base funding projections identified.

Mr. Murphy explained that facility usage is included as part of the partnership between the City and the Conservancy.

Mr. Ekblaw explained that in order to assure the long-term protection of the Preserve, it was determined that it would make sense to include it as part of City Council's budget process.

Mr. Owen said that education is the cornerstone for gaining support for the Preserve. He reviewed the history of the creation of the Preserve, attributing citizen support to a program that educated elementary schoolchildren, who in turn influenced their parents to support the Preserve tax.

Mr. Ekblaw said that there is no single document listing tangible goals related to education in the Preserve. Programs through Community Services and the Conservancy have evolved over time. He anticipates that once direction is received from City Council, education goals can be defined so voters can more clearly understand them.

Mr. Owen noted that the current education plan included in the master services agreement includes education programs consisting of trailhead ambassadors, patrol ambassadors, and learning stations. The master services agreement is renewed every five years so that it remains transparent and competitive.

Chair Wenstrom requested that Mr. Owen prepare a presentation for a future meeting, outlining the Conservancy's education goals and anticipated costs.

Mr. Murphy noted that the numbers are a baseline, based on historic costs. He anticipates that in the future, Preserve programs can be funded through a process similar to the non-profit funding process used in the Human Services department, which would include presentations to the Preserve Commission and forwarding of funding recommendations to City Council.

Commissioner Smith inquired whether there are more educational programs the Conservancy would like to offer. Mr. Owen replied there are more educational programs they would like to offer; he can present more detail at a future meeting.

Commissioners asked if it would be beneficial to create a guiding document for the education plan. Mr. Ekblaw said that staff can come back with additional documentation about community services and education goals. Discussion about a possible master education plan can be brought forward to a meeting in coordination with input from the City Council.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the research goals as outlined in the Ecological Resource plan, which include plants, wildlife, natural resources, to maintain biological diversity and long-term sustainability in the area of ecology. Much of what is being looked at is determining thresholds of change in the Preserve and the potential impacts. As new research is completed, support materials may be developed.

Mr. Ekblaw talked about the opportunity to update the Ecological Resource plan, which is estimated to have a one-time cost of approximately \$150,000. Estimated budget costs for research will be a baseline range and will fluctuate each year based on projects and potential

partnerships. Establishing a baseline number offers assurance that certain programs are maintained.

Mr. Ekblaw said that now that development of the Preserve is reaching completion, focus is shifting to the management role. He said that there are opportunities to update the ecological resource plan and other things to help further education and what long-term targets should be. Discussion ensued regarding accomplishments that have been achieved with the help of partnerships.

Mr. Owen said that the Conservancy has identified in its strategic plan that all of their scientific research in the Sonoran Desert is only applicable if it can be interpreted into education. Research will be dedicated to things that are not currently being studied and that can be translated into building unique programming that can impassion people about the Sonoran Desert. He talked about the lack of research on arid environments and the possibility of creating processes that could significantly shorten the time it takes to rebuild a healthy ecosystem.

Commissioner Hackbarth stressed the importance of increasing the research to include things such as archeology in order to further the ecological view of what is in the Preserve.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the history behind the creating Ecological Resource Plan. Because the acquisition process is reaching completion and focus is shifting to management and maintenance priorities, this is a good time to update the document.

In response to a question from Commissioner Coluccio, Mr. Hamilton stated that the updated Ecological Resource Plan (ERP) will contain the key indicators species being monitored to assess the health of the Preserve. When the ERP was written, they did not know what species were in the Preserve. An update discussion would include an update on how what has been learned can guide specific research goals. Staff will prepare a summary presentation outlining the existing ERP.

Discussion ensued regarding updating the ERP, the process of requesting funds from the General Fund as part of the annual budget process, preparing long-term visions in anticipation of the expiration of the existing Preserve taxes in 2025 and 2034, and budget opportunities. Mr. Ekblaw reiterated that the goal at this time is to make a presentation to City Council by the end of the calendar year, obtain Council member feedback, and use that feedback to refine the documents.

#### C. Policy Item #2.C. Summary of Previous Presentation for– Corridors protection

Mr. Ekblaw recalled the presentation originally given six years ago regarding inclusion of a wildlife crossing in the Preserve improvement projections. At that time, the Commission requested \$2 million be set aside. Recently, the capital improvement projects department reviewed the possibility of a land bridge west of 128th Street and Rio Verde. The estimated cost for a land bridge with a 14-foot clear span and structure necessary to support soil and vegetation, including management of drainage channels, was a minimum of \$10 million. Mr. Ekblaw noted that opportunities could be available for some private donations or regional transit funds.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions.

Mr. Ekblaw said that the Transportation Commission will be having a follow-up discussion regarding 128th Street next week.

Mr. Ekblaw said that a safety crosswalk in the area of 128<sup>th</sup> and Rio Verde near the land bridge could be considered as part of the transportation aspect of the project.

D. Policy Item #2.D. Range of possible projected costs associated with Invasive Plants and Restoration

Mr. Ekblaw gave a presentation about the removal and management of invasive species. He noted that initial focus is on buffelgrass and fountain grass, but over time additional species will be included in the process. Projected costs include use of contractors for the work on large areas, including removal of plants, chemical treatments, and follow-up treatment where necessary. Contractors will focus on areas that exceed the workload availability of staff and volunteers. The goal is to address approximately 5 to 200 acres per year at a projected annual cost of \$150,000 to \$200,000. Contractors who have been consulted indicated that few other land management agencies are as comprehensive, holistic, and programmatic in their approach as the City of Scottsdale.

Mr. Owen noted that the stewards will continue to research and monitor for invasive plants and apply spot removals, but the organization is supportive of using contract services for maintenance of large areas.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Mr. Owen said that fountain grass was added to Arizona's noxious weeds list two years ago, making it illegal to sell. He talked about a past program that was made possible through a fire management grant and in partnership with the City, where residents were given the opportunity to receive a native plant in exchange for proof that they had removed fountain grass from their property.

Further discussion about efforts being made within the city to address invasive plants in open space areas throughout the city and Valley wide will be agendaized for a future meeting.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed cost projections focused on restoring areas of previous disturbances. The goal is to target approximately 200 acres phased over a five to ten-year period at an estimated one-time cost of \$2 million to \$4 million. Mr. Owen clarified that if a catastrophic situation were to occur, restoration would be funded through a separate City resource.

Mr. Ekblaw presented information on mapping, monitoring and assessment of progress of invasive plants, wildland fire and restoration projects. An average of \$500,000 per year has been identified for all three areas. Maintenance will include mapping of project progress and identification of new areas, monitoring the status of areas that have been treated, and identification of revisions to strategies. Matching grant opportunities will require detailed tracking of progress.

Mr. Ekblaw discussed the daily preserve operations and maintenance and the need for additional staff support. Targeted cost projections for new efforts are estimated at approximately \$1 million per year.

Volunteer management administration and support including coordinated management efforts, direct support of education programs, including training programs, GIS support, and general support have a projected cost of \$125,000 to \$150,000 annually.

Commissioners requested additional information on the Conservancy's research efforts and what they are planning to add in the future. Mr. Owen said that all of the estimated costs are based on the minimums to continue the current efforts. A more robust program would be possible with a larger budget.

## **7. STAFF REPORTS**

October/November Celebration Dates

Mr. Hamilton said that the Camino Campana dedication is scheduled for October 31, 2021 at 10:30 a.m. An invitation will be sent to Commissioners.

Dedication of Pima-Dynamite Trailhead is scheduled for November 13, 2021 at 9:00 a.m. The fire department is scheduled to do a final inspection tomorrow, October 15th and the certificate of occupancy is expected to be issued in the next couple of weeks. Directional signs will be installed at Pima-Dynamite tomorrow.

## **8. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS, AND AGENDA ITEMS**

All dates listed are tentative and subject to amendment:

2021 meetings through November:

### **Regular meetings**

Wed. November 3<sup>rd</sup> – Policy Process

### **Special meetings**

October 21<sup>st</sup> – Policy Process

November 18<sup>th</sup> – Policy Process

Requested future agenda items include:

- Access area plan/land acquisitions
- Response to Commissioner questions
- Trailhead security measures, including possibility of installing cameras
- Naming project – January meeting
- Update on invasive plant management resulting from the recent rains

## **9. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS**

There were no further Commissioner comments.

## **12. ADJOURNMENT**

COMMISSIONER COLUCCIO MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. COMMISSIONER HACKBARTH SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR WENSTROM, COMMISSIONERS COLUCCIO, HACKBARTH, LIPPS, OLSSON, AND SMITH VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. VICE-CHAIR LAPAT-POLASKO WAS NO LONGER PRESENT. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

With no further business to discuss, being duly moved and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 7:42 p.m.

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