



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE
McDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING MINUTES**

Thursday, March 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 Savannah Engelking, Mark Hackbarth (MS Teams), Laurie LaPat-Polasko (MS Teams), and Marsha Lipps

ABSENT: Commissioner Jeffrey Smith

STAFF: Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director; Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager; Gina Kirklin, Finance Director; Natural Resources Coordinators John Loilet and Madison Barasha; and Bill Murphy, Assistant City Manager

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Coluccio called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as noted above.

Chair Coluccio announced that this is Commissioners Lipps and LaPat-Polasko's last meeting. Staff thanked them for their years of service and presented each of them with a gift.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

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

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of the Regular Meeting minutes of:

February 1, 2024

COMMISSIONER LIPPS MOVED TO APPROVE THE FEBRUARY 1, 2024 MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES. COMMISSIONER ENGELKING SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR OLSSON, COMMISSIONERS HACKBARTH, LAPAT-

POLASKO, LIPPS, AND ENGELKING VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES. COMMISSIONER SMITH WAS ABSENT.

February 7, 2024

Discussion ensued regarding the use of the term "keystone species" as listed in the bullet points outlining ERP recommendations. It was decided to leave the list as written.

VICE-CHAIR OLSSON MOVED TO APPROVE THE FEBRUARY 7, 2024 MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION MEETING MINUTES. COMMISSIONER LIPPS SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR OLSSON, COMMISSIONERS HACKBARTH, LAPAT-POLASKO, LIPPS, AND ENGELKING VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

5. McDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY UPDATE

Melanie Tluczek, Conservancy Director of Science and Education, gave an update on McDowell Sonoran Conservancy activities. Their presentation included updates on the Exploration Days live event held last week; upcoming field trips and in-person school visits; the joint invasive species work with the city; Steward activities and the Steward recognition program, which will be held at Scottsdale Stadium Fieldhouse. They introduced the Conservancy's new CEO, Amanda Hofmann-Handy.

6. PROTECT THE PRESERVE PROCESS UPDATE

Kroy Ekblaw, Preserve Director, provided an update on the City Council Work Study session held last week. He said that there were some questions regarding the upcoming process, the maximum funds to be allocated to WestWorld, and the remaining 2004 Preserve tax. Overall, Council expressed support for the recommendations.

Ms. Kirklin presented the City Treasurer's Office McDowell Sonoran Preserve financial update, noting that the McDowell Sonoran Preserve financial plans are evaluated and updated to reflect the best available information and then presented to City Council annually. Her presentation included a detailed overview of the proposed FY 2025 five-year financial plan ranging from FY 2023/24 through FY 2028/29. She said that there is \$216 million debt outstanding, which will be paid down between FY 2024 and FY 2037. The forecasted ending fund balance is approximately \$137 million and does not reflect any spending on capital improvements and is not sufficient to cover the remaining outstanding debt. The forecast suggests that there is room for improvements and land acquisition in times of a good economy, but there is concern about the impacts of the rental tax and possible elimination of food sales tax. Ms. Kirklin said that they are forecasting approximately \$200 million by the end of the five-year period, which could be enough to pay the rest of the debt service by 2028/29, earlier than 2034.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Ms. Kirklin explained that under the parameters of the loan, the debt will be eligible to be paid off without penalties in 2027, which would lower the interest expense. One option to pay off the loan earlier would be to put available cash into an escrow account and invest into specific securities and that escrow and interest earnings could be used to make debt service payments until 2027. Paying off debt is a financial decision that City Council would direct the treasurer to act on. Mr. Ekblaw noted that even though debt could be paid off in 2027, there won't be enough money to pay it off by that time.

Mr. Ekblaw reviewed the status of the process, noting that the Task Force has recommended that the Parks and Recreation Commission and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission serve in oversight positions for their departments and that WestWorld, police, and fire be overseen by City Council. Once the sales tax levy is approved by the voters, the Preserve Ordinance would require an amendment to note that the Commission will have an oversight responsibility. Council is expected to consider possible ballot language over the next few months.

7. FUTURE ONE-TIME PRESERVE COSTS REVIEW

Mr. Ekblaw provided a review of costs for possible future improvements to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, including a summary of one-time costs associated with trailheads, a future wildlife crossing land bridge, and annual projects across the Preserve. He stressed that there are no refined plans and the projected numbers are conservative. Estimates for the wildlife crossing include cost escalation for ten years, which almost doubles the total project cost. Mr. Ekblaw gave a detailed overview of the Preserve trailhead improvements draft and Commissioners asked clarifying questions during his presentation. The wildlife crossing land bridge project costs include a list of items, including a fence that would direct animals to the bridge. Federal grant opportunities are being considered and there could be an opportunity for some funding with transportation dollars.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Mr. Ekblaw said there is approximately 11.5 to 13 miles of fencing needed for the wildlife crossing project. It will be important to understand what the Transportation department has planned for that area; however, 128th street is currently not in the Transportation five-year capital improvement plan. Projections are based on concepts only and are subject to change due to scope, construction timing, and design/field discovery of unknown conditions. Mr. Ekblaw explained that some needs are not considered in the estimates because they will be covered through the Facilities Management Department.

Commissioners expressed support for formalizing the proposed numbers and bringing the summary back for a formal approval.

8. ERP (ECOLOGICAL RESOURCE PLAN) UPDATE AND SCHEDULE

Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager, reviewed amendments made to the Ecological Resource Plan (ERP) working draft based on prior input received from Commissioners. He noted that the ERP will be a critical element in managing the Preserve and will be used to help the Commission prioritize recommendations to City Council on budgetary needs for the following year. He asked the Commission to provide any additional input they might have.

Discussion ensued and Commissioners asked clarifying questions and made additional recommendations. Feedback included comments on the following:

- Metrics should be things that can be put into an RFP and have measurable results. Many metrics in the document are tasks, not metrics.
- Use language in the document that will still be relevant in ten years.
- Distinguishing baselines.
- Include external resources as part of an annual or five-year review.
- Monitor human impact.

- Monitor game species health.
- Road traffic study.
- Add information on why each indicator species is part of the plan.

A handout with suggestions was provided to staff and Commissioners were invited to email staff with additional comments. Mr. Hamilton said that Arizona Game and Fish will be giving their annual presentation to the Commission in the next couple of months and they could be asked to include information on their program for monitoring animal health. Mr. Ekblaw said that at some point they could do a work study with Arizona Game and Fish so that there could be a more in-depth discussion.

9. ROCK CLIMBING PLAN REFINEMENTS UPDATE

Mr. Hamilton, Preserve Manager, provided an update on the refinements to the conceptual Rock Climbing Plan for Granite Mountain and Cholla Mountain areas. He said that after consulting with members of the rock-climbing community, staff adjusted a few things on the 2016 previously approved Granite Mountain Plan and have developed a baseline for Cholla Mountain. The maps showed examples of both single-access and multiple-access points. Mr. Hamilton gave examples of sign considerations, including signs that would be posted at the "T" intersections where a climbing access trail intersects with the regular trail using language saying the trail is a primitive area and encouraging climbers, while dissuading hikers, equestrians, and bikers. He also provided examples of sign styles and language that could be posted a short distance onto the climbing route itself, low to the ground with climbing route information. He stressed that there is nothing in the Ordinance that prohibits hikers from using the climbing routes. Once staff receives direction, the routes will be flagged and the team will walk the area and make adjustments based on archeological and ecological considerations.

Discussion ensued regarding the map and sign options. For the Cholla Mountain area, Commissioners were interested in starting with a single access point "wishbone" trail and making adjustments over time based on usage and input from the climbing community; placing signage on the climbing trail rather than at the "T" intersection to reassure climbers that they are heading the right direction, while not drawing attention of hikers; and using an indicator on main trail signs that the "social trail" is actually a climbing trail. Mr. Hamilton said he will consult with the climbing community about how they create their itineraries for rock climbing excursions. He explained that the city can indicate that it is a climbing trail but cannot indicate the level of climbing difficulty for the various areas. Staff will seek public input once the Commission is comfortable with the draft plan.

10. STAFF REPORTS

- Browns Ranch Homestead Trail

Mr. Hamilton gave an update on the progress at Brown's Ranch Homestead Trail. The Corral Trail reroute is complete and open to the public. The construction of the Homestead Trail is in progress and once completed will be opened to the public. Staff is working on design concepts, artwork, and messaging for the interpretive signage. Mr. Hamilton anticipates trail signs to be installed in May or June, new maps to be printed over the summer, and a grand opening celebration to be scheduled in October. He noted that the Brown's descendants are involved with the family history portion of the project.

- Wildland Fire Fuel Treatments

Mr. Hamilton gave an update on the wildland fire fuel treatments schedule, noting that fuel treatments are made possible through a Healthy Forest Initiative Grant through the Department

of Forestry and Fire Management. Areas that have been completed include Granite Mountain Trailhead, Fraesfield Trailhead, and parts of Legend Trail Parkway, Pima Road, and Stagecoach Pass Road. Tom's Thumb Trailhead area and 128th Street will be done this season, as well as a five-mile section of Scottsdale Road.

- Invasive Plant Treatment

Mr. Hamilton gave an update on the progress of invasive plant treatments, highlighting areas that have been completed. He said that the Taliesin West land qualifies to be treated with DFFM grant dollars. City Council approved the ability to write an agreement with groups that own private land that is preserved, for the City to use grant dollars and crews with an indemnity agreement on those properties. The second grant will be used to treat more remote areas, using helicopter water drop operation and a retreat of the 170 acres that were previously treated.

11. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS AND AGENDA ITEMS

All Dates listed are tentative and subject to amendment:

- Regular Meetings – April 4; May 2; June 6

Mr. Ekblaw will follow up with Commissioners on potential alternate April meeting dates.

12. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

Chair Coluccio suggested that the Police Park Rangers be invited to give a presentation.

13. ADJOURNMENT

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

With no further business to discuss, being duly moved and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 7:41 p.m.

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