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GUEST OPINION

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Desert Conservation Plan a sham and a shame

By WILLIAM ARNOLD

The April 23 guest column by County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry may have left some in our community feeling a genuine sense of pride and accomplishment about the process and creation of our latest land-use plan; the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

Be assured, the emperor – in this case, Huckelberry – has no clothes.

As one of the 100-plus members of the “steering committee” appointed by the Pima County Board of Supervisors to oversee, create and ultimately support the SDCP, I must confess that we have failed miserably.

The steering committee has had no oversight and certainly no creation. As a result, I fear that there may be little support in the end for what was originally envisioned as a bold step in a new direction for Pima County.

The headline on Huckelberry’s article was “Desert protection key to our future.” This response should be titled “Meaningful public debate and analysis key to our future.”

Almost two years into this process, the “steering committee” has yet to make a single decision on the form, content or scope of the plan.

The public “participation” that the county manager so heavily emphasizes has been nothing but a one-way, force-fed, over-controlled, dictatorial series of “events” designed to keep the members of the steering committee busy while the county develops the plan behind closed doors.

“Participate” is a verb. Action by the participants is a prerequisite to having “participated.” Pima County defines a participant as a person who shows up and allows his or her name to be on a list, implying they agree with the county’s unilateral actions.

That’s hardly what any of us had in mind when we volunteered to spend hundreds of hours as committee members trying to redirect and improve our community’s future.

As the largest “private” land owner in the county, the state controls vast natural resources including pristine

stands of Ironwood (the “tree of life” in our Sonoran bioregion), huge watersheds with massive riparian areas and some of the most fragile slope and mountainous areas in southern Arizona.

In a December 1999 memo to Sharon Bronson, who then chaired the Board of Supervisors, State Land Commissioner Michael Anable said, “It is important that the state have a more active role in the planning process, rather than merely being allowed to provide written comments in response to the plan drafts.”

He added, “Pima County has not chosen to allow the department to have a meaningful role in the development of the . . . draft plan.”

Sadly, because our county won’t tolerate any input, we have lost the opportunity to insure that the plan is a cohesive, multijurisdictional plan.

More importantly, we have no assurance from the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service that they will even consider a plan that is now nothing more than Swiss cheese – reflecting the holes left as a consequence of the removal of state land.

If Fish & Wildlife won’t approve the plan, it will rapidly become but a distant memory.

About 874,000 acres of state lands are available for development in Pima County. Huckelberry estimates that only 6 percent of this land is subject to the Urban Lands Development Act, essentially allowing the state a free hand to decide the fate of the remaining 821,000 acres which surround the Tucson urban area.

No meaningful plan – including the SDCP – can simply ignore this stunning fact. Readers will recall that Pima County voters didn’t approve Proposition 100 because it only protected 3 percent of state trust land. Remember the “97 percent for developers” campaign signs all over town?

The effect of Pima County’s decision to exclude state trust lands from the SDCP is tantamount to assuring that 100 percent of state trust land will be available for development.

In trying to participate in the creation of the SDCP, Anable is voicing the same concerns that we on the steering committee have: We want a more active role, review and to provide meaningful direction. No one wants to be relegated to being “allowed to provide written comments.”

Pima County’s handling of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan will not lead to the positive, centrist vision of a communitywide, consensus driven plan, as the community was told this process would be.

For the plan to succeed we must have an open, continuous dialogue at the steering committee and communitywide; to have anything less would be an abrogation of our form of government. There are no exceptions regardless of how fine the quality and tailoring of the Emperor’s robes.

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