

Desert protector Maeveen Behan dies
County's maestro behind conservation plan earns last honor

By Tony Davis
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The timing of Maeveen Behan's death couldn't have been more appropriate.

Seconds after the Pima County Board of Supervisors voted unanimously to name the county's million-acre conservation preserve area after her Tuesday morning, Behan, 48, the official who made it happen, took her last breath. She had been watching and listening to the meeting on TV from her bed at home.

That moment ended a yearlong battle with cancer and a 16-year career with the county government that was capped by her role as the architect of a revolutionary land conservation plan. It would eventually grace the pages of National Geographic magazine and win recognition from the American Planning Association. Her last job was director of the county's Office of Conservation, Science and Environmental Policy after spending much of her career as a top aide to County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry.

"It was a life well-lived," board Chairman Richard Elias observed shortly after the vote. "I'm glad she was able to hear the words of the board and statements from conservation people. It was kind of beautiful, in a way."

The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan was first requested well over a decade ago of the county by environmental groups, seeking to protect the pygmy owl and other imperiled species in the desert from the bulldozer. It was first formally proposed exactly a decade ago by Huckelberry as a way of preserving not just cacti but mountain parks, cottonwoods and cultural sites.

But it was Behan who made it all possible. She rounded up top scientists to form an advisory committee. She wrote or edited more than 100 reports on the plan. She organized an unwieldy but ultimately effective Steering Committee of 84 people from all groups with a stake in the conservation-development debate. She brought in experts in economics, environment, wildlife, demographics and planning to lecture the committee for months before the group put any thoughts on paper.

Few people involved thought this would ever turn out much more than a bunch of studies on a shelf when the process started. But it has been approved and financed to the tune of \$174 million in voter-approved open-space bonds — with the likelihood of more open-space bonds on the ballot in 2010. She also fashioned the idea of a Conservation Lands System — the reserve area that was renamed the Maeveen Marie Behan Conservation Lands System on Tuesday — that became the conservation plan's linchpin. Any developer who gets land in that area rezoned for higher home densities comes under heavy pressure from the county — although not a formal requirement — to set aside at least 65 percent of that property as open space.

This system didn't come easily. Developers, environmentalists and ranchers were wary about the effort, but most ultimately embraced or at least accepted it. Behan made that possible by assuaging concerns about the plan from these leaders. None of them trusted Huckelberry much, but they learned to trust her.

"Most of it was fear of the unknown, more about restrictions, about more and more onerous command and control kinds of restrictions," recalled Bill Arnold, a real estate broker and property-rights activist. "One of the conversations she and I had early on was whether that was the way it would go or the carrot-and-stick kind of approach, using incentives. She agreed with that idea, to use the carrot to make property owners make the right choice."

Environmentalist Carolyn Campbell said she assumed the worst about the county's intentions at first and recalled fighting with Behan a lot for a while. But "we evolved, and I got to respect her intelligence and understood that she was committed to conservation. The more reports and documents she wrote, the more of our advice she took, the more we realized she was responsive to our concerns.

"I've never met anybody like her. I doubt I ever will," said Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.

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