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NEWS

Price tag for open space put at \$2.6B

County mulls bond election to save land

By Tony Davis

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Tucson, Arizona | Published: 08.03.2006

It would cost taxpayers nearly \$2.6 billion to buy the most biologically valuable land for Pima County's groundbreaking Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan, county officials say.

What officials call a rough estimate from the county's Real Property Division is the first real stab at getting at the price tag of this land. It would include about 536,000 acres of grasslands, saguaro forests, mesquite scrub deserts, old-growth ironwood forests, riparian areas and other land prized by scientists for its ability to support a wide variety of plant and animal species.

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The conservation plan is aimed at saving enough land to protect 55 vulnerable species in the face of continued population growth and development over the next 50 years.

County officials prepared the estimate to help their Conservation Acquisition Commission decide how much money to seek to have put on the ballot for a possible 2008 bond election. County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry, one of the Sonoran plan's architects, has said he would want a bond election totaling somewhere between \$500 and \$600 million, including not just open space but a wide range of other kinds of projects.

The commission will meet today and

next Thursday to try to come up with a recommended open-space bond program. In 2004, voters approved \$174 million for open-space purchases and had approved \$27 million 1997. It is not expected that the county would seek a bond in 2008 to allow the purchase of all 536,000 acres the county has identified as valuable. The County Board of Supervisors will decide next year or in 2008 whether to hold an election and how much to seek in bonds.

In fact, county officials and an environmentalist who has led the charge for this plan agreed on Wednesday that it may not be necessary to buy all of the land identified. Instead, the county could buy development rights on some of this property, reducing the cost to the county.

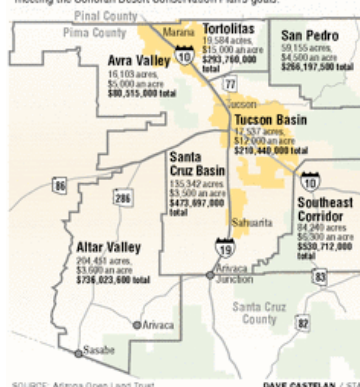
The county could also require developers to set aside environmentally valuable land in exchange for rezonings. Or, it could adopt regulations allowing developers to transfer the rights to develop environmentally sensitive land to less sensitive land.

But if voters value open space, residents have enough wealth that they could afford \$2.6 billion to pay for it, observed Marshall Vest, director of economic and business research at the University of Arizona's Eller College of Management. The open-space price tag isn't much more than the \$2.1 billion raised by a half-cent sales tax voters approved in May to widen roads and improve the bus system, he said.

Still, a real-estate agent and opponent-turned-supporter of the conservation plan said Wednesday that this is a lot of money no matter how the land is paid for. Voters have long shown willingness to support buying open space, but the county has a lot of competing interests and at some point voters will say no, said Bill Arnold, who sits on the county conservation commission.

Land-saving cost breakdowns

Pima County officials say it will cost nearly \$2.6 billion if the county were to buy the more than 500,000 acres of Sonoran Desert most important for meeting the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan's goals.



Goals in picking parcels

- The Nature Conservancy and Arizona Open Land Trust identified the 536,000 acres as the top priority lands for conservation from about a million acres of private and state land set aside by developers. The land selected is classified as either biological core areas, which include land suitable for at least 5 vulnerable species, or are important riparian areas. The two groups tried to meet three key goals in selecting this land: conserving lands adjacent to existing preserves, protecting special plant communities and maintaining a network of connected open land to allow for continued wildlife movements.

Source: The Arizona Open Land Trust

"This community is unique in its support for open space . . . But at some point you look around and say, 'How much is enough, or too much?'"

Bill Arnold, county conservation commission

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"\$2.5 billion will pay for lots of border security, for hospitals, and better schools," Arnold said. "This community is unique in its support for open space and has demonstrated its uniqueness many times and will demonstrate it in the future many times. But at some point you look around and say, 'How much is enough, or too much?' "

Carolyn Campbell, director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, said it doesn't matter to her if the county buys all this land, as long as it protects as much as possible by all other means as well. She agreed that a large portion of the land can and should be set aside by developers as a key conservation tool.

"The most important thing is to work on a preserve system that makes sense," Campbell said Wednesday. "I'd like to see all of it protected if we can afford it. It would be fine with me if we never have to spend a penny on it."

Steve Emerine, a former development consultant and now a weekly newspaper columnist, said Wednesday that spending up to \$2.6 billion on vacant land is crazy, since various government agencies already own 87 percent of all land in the county. That percentage shrinks considerably for eastern Pima County, where the Sonoran Desert plan's land-saving is concentrated.

But, "for anyone to propose that we not spend it for transportation or housing or parks for our kids or all the other things we need to do and instead and buy more vacant land ... is incredible," said Emerine, a longtime conservation plan critic. "We are not going to preserve every single saguaro in Pima County. If we had done that, there wouldn't be any of us here now."

But after watching developers clear the desert near Vail for new subdivisions, schoolteacher Cynthia Hartnagel said she is ready to dip into her pocketbook to buy more land if that's what it takes to slow down what she sees as destruction.

"We have a big stretch of land out here that I used to walk in, and they came in and bladed every single piece of it," said Hartnagel, who lives in a manufactured home with her husband and teaches kindergarten at Tucson Unified School District's Reynolds Elementary School. "It's crucial to spend every cent we have to save land. If that kind of development is what the alternative is, I want to stop that immediately."

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