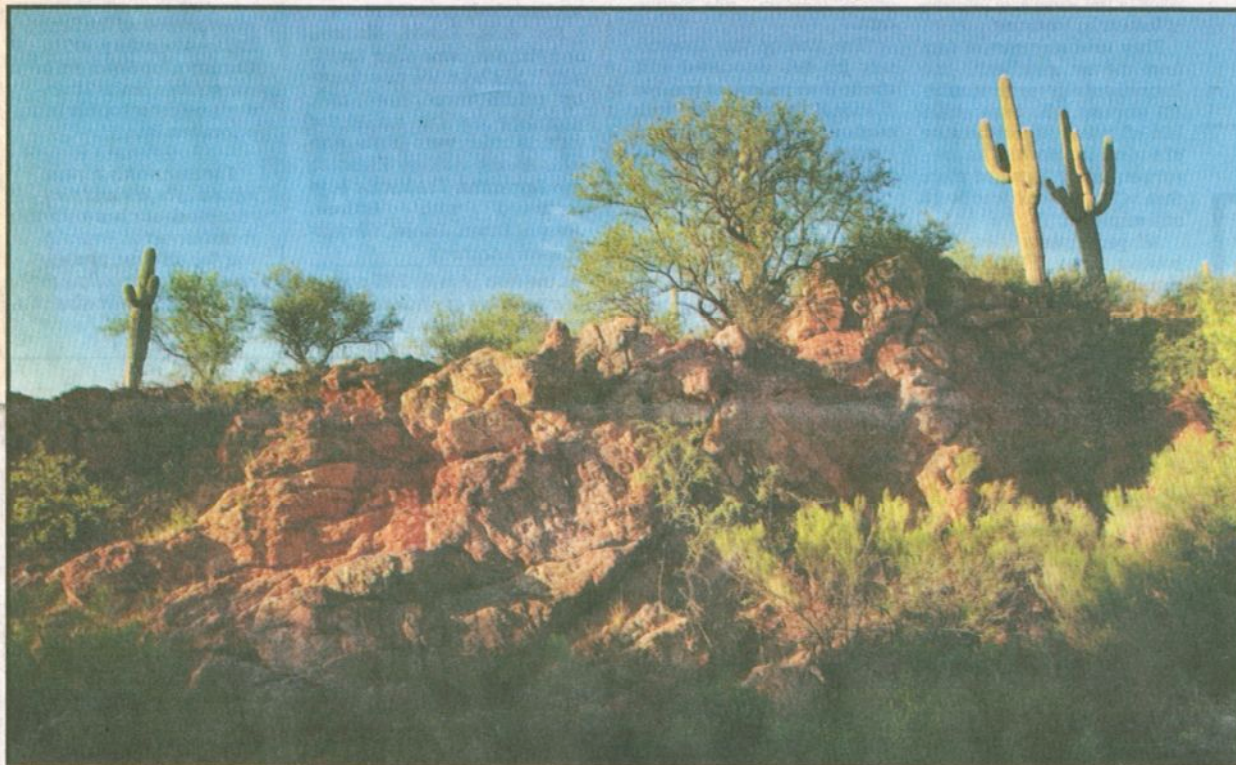


5/8/04

Unspoiled desert or family homes?



Photos by Aaron J. Latham / Arizona Daily Star

Late sunlight splashes the cliffs of Davidson Canyon, whose fate — development or open space — Pima County voters will decide on May 18.

Future hangs on open space issue

By Tony Davis
ARIZONA DAILY STAR

Davidson Canyon running south of Interstate 10 near the Sonoita highway offers cottonwood, willow, mesquite and ash trees towering above a wandering ribbon of a stream.

The canyon also could become the home of The Canyon at V Bar Ranch, whose sales brochure offers a "unique 145-lot development opportunity."

On May 18, the future of that 603-acre parcel and thousands of others will lie in the hands of voters who decide on Bond Question 1: \$174 million for open space.

If it passes, Pima County will use \$112 million to buy some of the county's biologically richest habitat. The rest would buy land near

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Davis-Monthan Air Force Base's runway and other open space that is less biologically sensitive but still important to neighbors.

The county recently obtained a \$500,000 state grant to buy some of the Davidson parcel, but needs the open space bonds to pay the county's \$4 million appraised value or the owner's \$5.42 million price.

Davidson Canyon and the rest of Tucson's far Southeast Side lie in the center of the debate over this bond package because the open space proposal would spend \$38



Realtor Bill Arnold closes a gate behind him as he enters Davidson Canyon. Arnold, broker for that area, supports the open space bonds.

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OPEN SPACE

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million there. That's 35 percent more than in any other region that the bond package covers.

A conservation advisory committee recommended this area for the most money because scientists who laid the groundwork for the county's habitat conservation plan recommended protecting the most land there: About 213,000 acres out of 600,000 countywide that the scientists ranked most important to protect.

The bond's backers say saving this land makes sense because of its huge array of water resources, wildlife, plant life and archaeological ruins, and because of the rapid growth across the Southeast Side.

But the proposal's critics say it makes no sense for the government to buy more land when it already owns so much in Pima County. They've also questioned the science underlying the open space bond package, suggesting the county spend this money on roads or medical care.

Plan's diverse backers

The idea of saving this land draws a diverse following, with many Southeast Side developers supporting the bonds as strongly as environmentalists. Peter Backus, a developer of three subdivisions in the Rincon Valley near Old Spanish Trail and Camino Loma Alta, co-chairs the Friends of the Sonoran Desert's open space bond campaign.

Bill Estes, developer of the 3,600-home Rancho del Lago project in Vail, and Realtor Bill Arnold, broker for the Davidson Canyon parcel, are strong supporters.

The bond issue also is the centerpiece of a regional council's effort to protect the most important features of the 50,000-acre Cienega Corridor. Its mesquite forests, grasslands, prickly pear stands and creosote flats slice east from the unincorporated community of Vail to the Cochise County line.

From their 20 acres of desert lying 20 minutes by foot from Cienega Creek, Bill and Jillian Savary say they can see the benefit every day of saving open space. Their house, dog pens and driveway cover less than 20 percent of their land. The rest is home for three hummingbird species, 11 snake species, gray foxes, coyotes, javelina and deer. A black bear once visited a dirt road near their house.

"When you look at what's happened to the Northwest Side, it seems that with the remaining open spaces, we have to protect the most valuable areas or it will all be gone," Jillian Savary said. "To drive to the beautiful Sonoran Desert, you'll have to take an hour."

For developers, the bond package offers a more peaceful future. The county would use these bonds to obtain federal approval of a habitat conservation plan, allowing growth in less sensitive areas in exchange for preserving more sensitive land.

"I don't think that people realize that of all the land that has been developed here, some of it should have been left untouched to remind us of why we came to live in Tucson, and why Tucson is a better place to live in than Phoenix," Backus said.

While some of the remaining sensitive land will be developed, the rest should be saved, even though its profit potential is high, he said. "If I don't (build on) it, somebody else will, and what I'm saying is, 'Don't let anyone do it.'"

Why more protected land?

But critics ask why more protected land is needed when 87 percent of the county is government-owned. Although much of that state-owned land could be sold for development, bond opponents say such sales have proceeded so slowly they have made little difference in the land supply for new growth.

The taxpayers' most pressing needs today are education, transportation and medical care, said Steve Emerine, a real estate industry consultant who is speaking for himself against the open space bonds. But the \$732 million total bond program now before voters helps none of those issues except Kino Community Hospital, and there it won't improve badly needed trauma care, Emerine said.

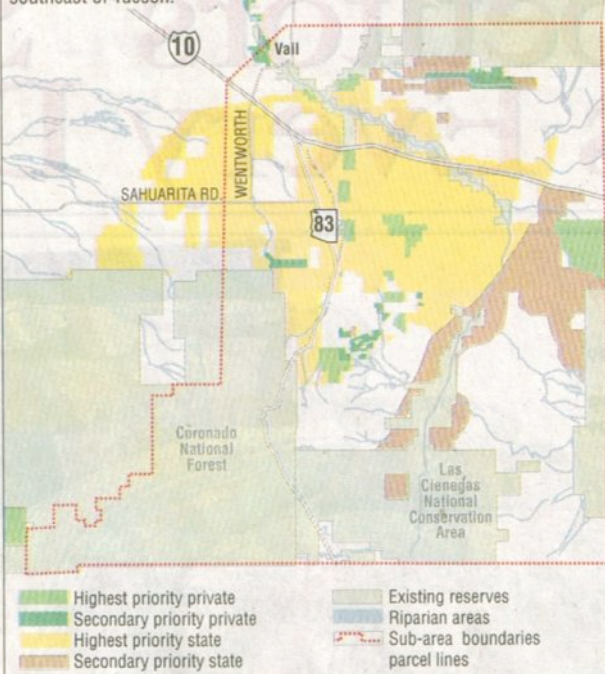
"If we obligate ourselves for three-quarters of a billion dollars with these bonds, what will we do for Tucson Unified School District or Pima Community College, or when the city comes out and says we need some bonds?" Emerine asked.

Opponents Emerine and Glynn Burkhardt question whether Pima County needs a habitat-saving plan when no other Arizona county has one.

The bonds would enhance the land values of landowners such as Backus, Diamond Ventures

Cienega open space vision

Environmentalists, county officials and many Southeast Side residents would like the county to buy and preserve these parcels in the Cienega Corridor southeast of Tucson.



SOURCE: Pima County Technical Services

Dave Castelan / Staff

and Fairfield Homes, whose property lies near proposed acquisitions or would be acquired, said Burkhardt, president of the Coalition for Multiple Use.

Backus, however, said he doesn't believe the open space purchases would upgrade his projects' land values. And Kathy Kubish, a senior property appraiser, said she doesn't think the open space bonds would help Diamond's Rocking K values, because the development already lies near national park and forest land.

Calculations questioned

Burkhardt and other critics point to what they see as big discrepancies in the conservation plan's scientific calculations.

Three years ago, a county report said the Mexican long-tongued bat, one of 55 species the plan would protect, had 1.19 million acres of good potential habitat in Pima County. This year, a new report lowered that to 458,000. The good habitat for Allen's big-eared bat rose in that period from 154,000 to 555,800 acres. Acreage also changed for 10 other species.

What is sloppy science to critics such as Burkhardt, however, is a sign of a valid scientific process to Paul Fromer, a San

Diego biological consultant who helped produce these reports.

Each computer model the county used to produce the reports was a scientific hypothesis, said Fromer, adding that the county changed the models seven times. "A model is a reasonable prediction of the distribution of the species as we know it. Each model was a refinement of the other."

Anyone can come up with an estimate, countered Burkhardt. "An estimate is not a very scientific process at all."

Area's running streams

To make their case, bond supporters point to the running streams that make the Southeast Side water-rich, by Tucson standards. Three streams, Cienega and Agua Verde creeks and Davidson Canyon, run all or part of the year.

Through rainfall runoff recharging the aquifer, this area furnishes up to 20 percent of the Tucson area's water supply, the Arizona Department of Water Resources says.

During the 1990s, a University of Arizona graduate student recorded hundreds of archaeological sites dating back as far as 10,000 years along Cienega Creek and its tributaries. Scien-

tists who worked on the conservation plan say it is also rich in sensitive species, with 27 to 33 of the 55 vulnerable species that the plan would try to protect.

It's also a corridor for mountain lions, black bears, bobcats and coatiundi traversing the desert from the Rincon to the Santa Rita mountains. The animals' tracks have been spotted in Cienega or its tributaries by volunteers for the environmentalist Sky Island Alliance.

Continuing growth

Finally, the region faces more growth every day.

Rancho Del Lago has about 500 homes occupied or under construction, its buyers drawn by relatively light traffic and its nearness to Tucson International Airport, Raytheon Missile Systems, the University of Arizona Science-Technology Park and Davis-Monthan. A half-dozen other subdivisions are sprouting along Camino Loma Alta, up to a mile away.

This fall, city of Tucson officials will finish a master plan for development of 10,000 acres of vacant, state-owned land along Houghton Road.

In 2005 or 2006, Diamond Ventures could be ready to build a bridge over Pantano Wash connecting its planned, 5,600-home, three-golf course Rocking K development to the rest of Tucson — and opening the Rincon Valley to more growth.

And the Cienega area east of Vail is already approved for 64,000 people under a 1959 zoning plan calling for low-, medium- and high-density housing, shops and industry on 21,139 acres. Most of that land now lies within core habitat protection areas for the county conservation plan, however, and county officials will consider rescinding the plan this summer.

To longtime Cienega-area resident Ginny Durham, the new homes look like ocean waves rolling over the desert.

She says the open space bonds are "an awful lot of money" that probably will raise her taxes. County officials say property tax rates won't rise if the bonds pass, but the tax rates would drop if the bonds fail.

Durham expects to vote for them anyway. "I have a feeling that if it doesn't get voted in, the taxes will still go higher and they'll just find something else to spend it on."

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