



# Friends of the Desert

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A project of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection in Pima County, Arizona  
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In an effort to ensure all Coalition supporters receive regular program updates, we're sending this monthly newsletter relaying information about important activities related to the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP) and other Coalition efforts.

## ***In This Issue:***

- ***Message from the Director***
- ***2008 Open Space Bond Needs Your Help! - Action***
- ***Important Pima County Comprehensive Plan Amendments***
  - Better Protection for Water Resources / Riparian Areas - Action***
  - Mission Peaks Proposal for up to 15,000 Housing Units - Action***

## **Message from the Director by Carolyn Campbell**

Dear Friends,

It is hard to believe that it's been close to a decade now since the Coalition formed to promote regional habitat conservation planning – then with 19 member groups and eventually 40! The successes we've had since we began our work have been, I believe, monumental. Since our first organizing meetings in early 1998, the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan has been implemented as a local land use planning tool. We have secured close to \$175 million of open space bond funding for Pima County through our successful 2004 campaign. With this funding, tens of thousand of acres of biologically-significant lands have been set-aside for protection through acquisition.

We have optimism that through our continued work, the County's Multi-Species Habitat Conservation Plan, when completed, will incorporate permanent protections for these lands, be fully funded, and will better protect – and recover! – the many vulnerable species of plants and animals of the Sonoran Desert.

Thanks to all of you for your support over the last many years. I am continually energized by your actions – large and small; they all contribute to the Coalition's ability to demonstrate the vast community support for the work that we do. I know I can count on all of you to continue your support. ***This month's newsletter contains a number of Action Items.*** We are asking you, our Friends of the Desert, to voice your opinion on all of these issues. To summarize:

- Next year's Bond Program will consist of many issues, or "Questions". Open Space is just one of them, and is competing with substantial requests for projects such as parks, public works, court buildings, libraries, public health facilities, neighborhood reinvestment, affordable housing, and solid waste facilities. Many of these projects have received considerable public comment; we need to do the same for Open Space! **We need you to voice your support for the 2008 Open Space Bond in order to make it a reality!**
- The County is proposing that water resources and land use be more fully integrated through amended policies in their Comprehensive Land Use Plan. Water usage will be considered earlier in the planning process so that developments with inappropriate water use can be denied. **We need your support and comments!**
- A development has been proposed in Pima County that if approved would allow construct of up to 15,000 housing and commercial units west of I-19 and the Santa Cruz River, near Sahuarita and Green Valley. This project lies wholly within the Conservation Lands System of the SDPCP, and the developers plan to mine groundwater to serve their residents and customers. **We are asking your help to ensure compliance with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan policies.**

Thanks again to all of you, for both your on-going financial support and actions,  
Carolyn



**2008 Open Space Bond Needs Your Help!**

As the 2004 Conservation Acquisition (Open Space) Program continues with implementation, Pima County is gearing up for another bond election in 2008. As of August 31, 2007, the County has spent nearly \$75 million of the \$174.3 million approved in the 2004 bond election. The County has acquired more than 25,500 acres of conservation land and holds grazing leases on an additional 86,000 acres of state trust land. All of these lands are an integral component to the success of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan.

The long-range vision of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan created an acquisition program that would necessitate a series of open space bonds in order to acquire all of the important conservation lands. The citizens' Conservation Acquisition Commission (CAC) has finalized its recommendation of \$285 million for the 2008 Open Space Bond. The lands not yet acquired in the 2004 bond will be "rolled over" into the 2008 bond program, minus those that have since been developed. As well, there have been minor additions to the 2004 eligible property acquisition map.

These additions include additional private and state lands in the Tortolita Fan, grasslands, and lands associated with water rights, streams, and springs. The CAC also included a number of properties that have significance to the community. These properties include parcels at the base of Sentinel Peak (A Mountain), the West Desert Preserve in Green Valley, Rosemont Ranch, and private lands which would be added to Saguaro National Park.

The 2008 Bond Program will fund various project categories in addition to Open Space. These categories include public works, justice and law enforcement, parks, transportation safety, affordable housing, neighborhood investment, libraries, public health facilities, and cultural resources. Each category was assigned to a subcommittee which will forward a recommendation to the Pima County Bond Advisory Committee (BAC). This Committee will review the proposals and send their recommendations to the Pima County Board of Supervisors in the coming months.

The subcommittee proposals represent over \$1.4 billion in project funding requests. It will now be up to the BAC to make cuts to the proposals in order to bring the bond package to somewhere in the range of \$600 - \$700 million.

Another important element to include is floodplain acquisitions. Pima County Regional Flood Control requested \$10 million dollars to continue their program, but no funding was included in the Parks Subcommittee package.

Projects	Millions
<b>Conservation Acquisition</b>	<b>\$285</b>
Parks	\$357
Public Works	\$140
Law Enforcement	\$60
Transportation Safety	\$50
Cultural Resources	\$50
Affordable Housing	\$37.6
Neighborhood Reinvestment	\$31.75
Public Health Facilities / Libraries	~\$400

**In order for Open Space to be fully funded at \$285 million, the BAC needs to hear from you!**

Please let the Pima County Bond Advisory Committee know that the protection of the Sonoran Desert is your number one priority!

Enclosed is a postcard addressed to the Pima County Bond Advisory Committee supporting \$285 million for conservation acquisition and \$10 million for flood plain acquisition. **Please take the time to sign this and put it in the mail.** You can also send letters to Nicole Fyffe, County Administrators Office, 130 W. Congress St., Floor 10, Tucson, AZ 85701. Or, send email comments to [bondinfo@pima.gov](mailto:bondinfo@pima.gov).

**Important Pima County Comprehensive Plan Amendments**

**Better Protection for Water Resources / Riparian Areas**

As part of Pima County's Comprehensive Plan Amendment process, the Water Resources Element of the Regional Plan Policies is being amended. The overall goal of the amendment is to address water resource issues earlier in the land-use decision making process. The Coalition provided comments on a draft of this amendment in September as

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part of the public review process. The two most significant comments we provided were in relation to (1) more thoroughly addressing local groundwater depletions and (2) the need for more specific policies and guidelines:

- The draft did not adequately address local groundwater depletions. Currently, under state law, water can be drawn from one part of a water basin as long as it is recharged elsewhere in the basin. This reflects an emphasis on a regional water balance. However, when this happens, localized groundwater depletion occurs, often negatively impacting groundwater-dependent riparian areas in proximity to the point of water withdrawal. The Coalition requested that property owners be required to mitigate their impacts on local groundwater in the area that will be affected in order to better protect nearby riparian areas.
- The draft amendment did not provide adequately detailed policies for land-use decisions. For example, a previous draft included the following provision:  
*Plan amendments that would increase the development potential in areas that are less than five miles from a shallow groundwater area or groundwater dependent spring or stream shall not be approved if the development is likely to have negative impacts on the flow or stability of these ecological areas.*

Unfortunately, this policy, along with others, was removed from the most recent draft and replaced with more general policies. The Coalition requested that specific policies be included.

In general, the Coalition supports the revision of the Water Resources Element within the Comprehensive Plan. Accounting for water resource impacts early in the land-use decision-making process will assist in protecting Pima County's riparian areas and many endangered species. The Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan states that, "Riparian resources and aquatic systems *are the most vulnerable and least protected habitats in Pima County.*" (emphasis added) By revising this section of the Comprehensive Plan, Pima County will make great strides towards protecting these vulnerable habitats and resources.

**What You Can Do!** Contact the Planning and Zoning Commissioners and the Pima County Supervisors to let them know that you support the following points and want them included in the Water Resources Element of the Regional Plan Policies:

1. *Recharge activities must occur in the area being affected.*
2. *The inclusion of detailed policies that will ensure the protection of Water/Riparian Resources.*

The text of the Draft Amendment can be found at <http://www.rfcd.pima.gov/Recharge/index.htm> under "Draft Policies," along with additional background information. Coalition comments can be found at [www.sonorandesert.org](http://www.sonorandesert.org). **See box below for public input / meeting information.**

### **Mission Peaks Proposal for up to 15,000 Housing Units**

A Las Vegas firm, American Nevada Company, has submitted a development proposal to build up to 15,000 residential and commercial units on more than 4000 acres of biologically sensitive land near the Green Valley/Sahuarita area in unincorporated Pima County. The development proposal will be considered as a Comprehensive Plan Amendment by the County's Planning and Zoning Commission on October 31. The proposed development, known as Mission Peaks, is located south of Helmet Peak Road on the west side of I-19. The current zoning allows for 1 house per 4 acres, or about 1,200 houses. An adjacent Plan Amendment for 632 acres has been concurrently submitted for high density commercial by the Arizona State Land Department. Both sites lie within the County-designated Conservation Lands System.

### **Conservation Lands System**

The Conservation Lands System (CLS) is a key element of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP). The CLS was developed by the Science and Technical Advisory Team (made up of prominent University and agency biologists



from Southern Arizona) and adopted by the Pima County Board of Supervisors in 2001. CLS designations and associated development mitigation guidelines are part of the County’s comprehensive land use plan. Pima County lands were assigned CLS designations based on the biological value of the habitat and their contribution to landscape connectivity. The Mission Peaks development proposal seeks to designate only about 1000 acres, or roughly 25% of the site, as natural undisturbed open space, even though CLS guidelines require that over 3,500 acres of the residential and commercial projects need to be preserved on the site (see the following table for more detailed figures).

Table A

	Biological Core 80% <sup>1</sup>	Multiple Use 66- ¾% <sup>1</sup>	Outside CLS	Total Acres
Mission Peaks Specific Plan Area	1,982	2,930	61	4,918 <sup>2</sup>
Natural Open Space as per Conservation Guidelines	1,586	1,953	0	3,539

1 – Conservation Guideline

2 – This is an approximation based on County GIS data

**Off-site Mitigation Option**

County guidelines, which the Coalition supports, allows for other suitable lands, off-site, to be purchased and protected, in order to off-set the impacts on the site and better facilitate a comprehensive and connected preserve system of protected lands in the County. In a letter from the County Administrator to the developer dated January 4, 2007, he states that preserving only 1,054 acres on-site is allowable if the developer provides mitigation money to purchase, “potentially a minimum of 2,500 acres of private lands now subject to development, primarily in the northern Altar Valley.” However, a minimum of 9,500 acres of land would need to be purchased to comply with the CLS, depending on the type of habitat that is impacted. Considering that the price of land in the Altar Valley area is at a minimum \$6,000 per acre, the land mitigation required to off-set development impacts would require a minimum of \$57 million; the developer has offered merely \$13 million. The developer is also asking for exemption from the County’s Watercourse and Riparian Habitat Protection and Mitigation Requirements.

**WHAT YOU CAN DO!**

We need your help to let the Planning and Zoning Commissioners and Pima County Supervisors know that you support the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan and want CLS guidelines followed for the Mission Peaks development proposal. *See box below for public input / meeting information.*

Talking Points:

- The development should comply with the Conservation Lands System guidelines adopted by the County.
- Compliance would require: ~3,500 acres should be preserved on site **OR** if only 1,054 acres will be preserved on-site the developer should transfer at least \$57 million to the County to acquire conservation land.
- The development should comply with the County Watercourse and Riparian Habitat Protection and Mitigation Requirements.

**PUBLIC COMMENTS ON THE WATER RESOURCES AND MISSION PEAKS AMENDMENTS:**

**Attend one or both of the below meetings:**

**9 AM - Wednesday, October 31, 2007**, Planning and Zoning Commission, Public Works Building, Basement Meeting Room C & D , 201 N Stone Ave, Tucson, AZ

**9 AM - Tuesday, December 11, 2007**, Board of Supervisors, Board of Supervisors Hearing Room, Pima County Administration Building, 130 W. Congress, 1st floor, Tucson, AZ

**Send written comments to:**

**Due October 29<sup>th</sup> - P&Z Commission**, C/O Ben Changkakoti, Pima County Development Services/Planning Division, Public Works Building, 201 N. Stone Ave., 2nd Floor, Tucson, AZ 85701. Send your email to:

[manbendra.changkakoti@dsd.pima.gov](mailto:manbendra.changkakoti@dsd.pima.gov) **Due December 10<sup>th</sup> - Board of Supervisors**, Board of Supervisors Hearing Room, Pima County Administration Building, 130 W. Congress, 1st floor, Tucson, AZ 85701