

Zócalo

TUCSON ARTS, CULTURE, AND DESERT LIVING / APRIL 2018 / NO. 95



Cultivate Tucson Spring 2018 Market Catalog

27th Arizona International Film Festival Highlight Guide

Spring Studio Tour Guide

18 Summer Camps



Aerial view of the wildlife crossing that spans State Route 77 north of Tucson.

Animal Avenues

By Jeff Gardner

A MOTORIST hitting a deer with their car costs taxpayers an average of \$9000, when you take into account the fees and resources for emergency services, clean up and insurance. In an attempt to save the lives of both animals and humans alike, “wildlife linkages” are being constructed all throughout the greater Tucson area.

While many have been already been completed, such as the Oracle Road wildlife bridge, additional wildlife underpasses are currently in construction around Tangerine Road.

“The Tangerine crossings are a big topic of conversation right now and with the reports of high animal use from the Oracle crossings,” Sarah Whelan, program and outreach associate for the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection said. “Folks seem to be more engaged than ever in these types of projects.”

According to the CSDP’s website: “Preserving wildlife linkages in Pima County is one of the primary goals of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection.

Through a variety of projects, the Coalition hopes to preserve connected open space within wildlife linkages and facilitate the construction of wildlife crossings, such as bridges and underpasses, at key points along Pima County’s major roadways.”

These wildlife crossings are funded by the “Wildlife Linkages” funding initiative of the Regional Transportation Authority. In 2006, Pima County voters passed a half-cent tax increase to fund a variety of transportation related issues. This fund, titled the “Regional Transportation Authority Plan” amassed around two billion dollars. These “Transportation-related Critical Wildlife Linkages” constitute around \$45 million of that plan.

“We’ve been very involved with the RTA,” Carolyn Campbell, CSDP executive director said. “I was able to work with their technical teams when this was all begin started. It’s not necessarily a project just of ours, but we’re champions of it.”

continued...



According to the RTA's plan, a total of 17 projects are involved: 10 of which are finished, and seven currently in the works or planned. Among these are bridges for bighorn sheep over SR-86, underpasses near Silverbell Road.

A widening of Tangerine Road was already planned, which according to CSDP, was a perfect opportunity.

"The cost goes down substantially when we incorporate these projects with other construction plans," Whelan said. "We advocate for just about any of these improvements when we can."

Wildlife bridges and underpasses serve for a lot more than just to reduce roadkill. When a large roadway is built through the desert, that landscape is essentially severed. When a road is large enough, animals like deer, bobcats and coyotes rarely cross them, and when they do, many of them are struck by cars. What results are two increasingly homogenizing halves of a natural world instead of one landscape with migration and diversity.

In the case of the Oracle Road wildlife bridge, which also happens to be the first wildlife bridge in the entire Sonoran Desert, allows for wildlife flow between the Catalinas and Tortolitas. It is helping to recreate a connection between the two mountain ranges that was one severely limited.

However, the process of connecting wildlife linkages includes much more than a bridge or underpass over a roadway. Miles of fencing around the area must be constructed to funnel the animals toward the bridges and underpasses. In locations where wildlife bridges are completed, such as Oracle, recurring animal mortalities mostly occur where the fencing is still incomplete.

Within the first year of completion of these wildlife crossings, the Arizona Game and Fish Department, with the help of 48 field cameras throughout Pima County, documented more than 1,700 animals using the crossings. The animals included over 800 deer, over 300 javelina, almost 200 coyotes and

over 50 bobcats. Within only weeks of the unveiling, the first deer were spotted crossing the bridges.

The Game and Fish Department also found that different animal species prefer different passage types; mule deer prefer the bridges rising over the road while javelina and bobcats use the underpasses with far greater frequency.

These newest wildlife underpasses being built for Tangerine Road and La Cholla Boulevard are designed with those recently mentioned small mammals in mind. The underpasses will be six to nine feet in height, depending on the area, and will most likely have foxes, coyotes and tortoises using them. Underpasses also help with extra storm drainage and can serve as habitats for bats during the summer.

Collisions with larger animals result in an average of 200 human fatalities and \$8.4 billion in damages each year in the United States. Every one of the animals observed crossing a wildlife linkage is one less chance of possible disaster.

There is still a lot of work to be done, however. The largest roadway in Southern Arizona, the I-10, separates more habitat than any other and has no wildlife crossings now or planned for the future. The CSDP is currently evaluating projects for the I-10. There are some "informal" crossings, such as culverts, but no formally designated wildlife crossings.

"We're definitely looking at I-10," Whelan said. "It cuts through a number of wildlife locations and we can help that."

We're headed in the right direction, but there's plenty more work to be done before both humans and animals have safe roads of their own.

For more information on the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, visit sonorandesert.org. ■