



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE
McDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION
REGULAR MEETING – MINUTES**

Thursday, March 6, 2025
Granite Reef Senior Center - Room 1
1700 N. Granite Reef Road
Scottsdale, AZ 85251

PRESENT: Chairperson Steve Coluccio, Vice-Chair Kerry Olsson, Commissioners Savannah Engelking, Robert Hallagan, Susan Hirshman (MS Teams), Pruitt Layton, and Ryan Rybarczyk

STAFF: Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager; Nick Molinari, Senior Director Parks & Recreation and Preserve; Kerry Swick, Assistant Fire Chief

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Coluccio called the meeting to order at 5:12 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as listed above.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

Carla, Preserve Pioneer, spoke in support of the land bridge, now renamed the Rio Verde Overpass, that has been in the Preserve Master Plan since 1997. She said that she is a member of the Budget Review Commission (BRC) and has recently learned that the BRC plans to look at taking the Rio Verde Overpass out of the Preserve budget. Some City Council members are interested in sunsetting the second Preserve tax early and feel that removing the land bridge would enable that. Supporters of the land bridge have worked with the Arizona Game and Fish Department to put together literature outlining the history of Rio Verde Overpass land bridge, funding that has been identified for the project, and the importance of wildlife overpasses for the survival of Arizona's wildlife populations.

Commissioner Carla gave an overview of efforts that are underway to communicate with BRC members and City Council members who are opposed to the project because of the perceived cost. She clarified that the project is estimated to cost approximately \$32 million, possibly less, not \$80 million as has been rumored. She stressed that it would be helpful if the timeline for Rio Verde street widening would progress, so that the design process for the land bridge can begin, which will provide a better indication of what the actual cost of the project will be.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of the minutes of – Work Study Session January 30, 2025

Commissioners suggested that the first two bullets under Wildland Fire Management be replaced with, “the Budget allocation is \$300,000 for contractual services for vegetation and thinning projects,” and the second bullet be replaced with, “Mr. Hamilton explained that treatment costs would range from \$4,000 to \$5,000 per acre for 50 to 60 acres per year.”

COMMISSIONER ENGELKING MOVED TO APPROVE THE JANUARY 30, 2025, MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION WORK STUDY SESSION MINUTES AS AMENDED. COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSHMAN, LAYTON, OLSSON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

Approval of the minutes of – February 6, 2025

Commissioners suggested that the first two bullets under Preservation Periodic Projects be removed and replaced with, “The budget allocation for FY 2025/26 is \$100,000, to be used for larger periodic projects like deer collaring.”

COMMISSIONER RYBARCZYK MOVED TO APPROVE THE FEBRUARY 6, 2025, MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING MINUTES AS AMENDED. COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSHMAN, LAYTON, OLSSON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

5. McDOWELL SONORAN CONSERVANCY UPDATE

Brian Whitehead, Conservancy Senior Program Manager, gave an update on McDowell Sonoran Conservancy activities. His presentation included a review of Steward, Trailhead Ambassador, and patrol program volunteer statistics; upcoming Trail Safety Day and Canine Safety Day events scheduled for March and April; education programming; guided bike and hike programming; ongoing science projects, including cactus planting in the Diamond Fire area; and wildlife data collection. He extended an invitation for Commissioners to attend the Conservancy’s annual recognition event on April 3, 2025, at Scottsdale Stadium from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions. Mr. Whitehead said that he is not directly involved and doesn’t have much information about the April 12th Tour de Scottsdale, but his understanding is that there will be more participants than there were last year. He explained that the Guided Bike and Hike program is allowed to accept donations as part of the fundraising activity. The Conservancy will evaluate the success of the program at the end of March.

6. FUTURE ONE-TIME PRESERVE COSTS 5 YEAR PLAN PRIORITIES

Carla commented about the importance of the Gateway Trailhead update and asked that the Commission keep that project as a year-one priority.

Scott Hamilton, Preserve Manager, provided a review of costs for possible future improvements to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and the five-year plan priorities. Mr. Hamilton reviewed in detail the most

recent Preserve Fund Preliminary FY 2025 forecast by the Financial Services Department. He read notes that were submitted by the City Treasurer as part of the updated forecast indicating that the focus is on ensuring there is ample ability to make remaining debt service payments with a comfortable margin of safety to address the sudden loss of revenue collections at unexpected downturns; highlighting best practices in anticipation of the sunset of the 2004 sales tax; and that City Council has expressed interest in sunsetting the tax, but that nothing has been decided about arranging the funding in a way that it could potentially be sunsetted early. He noted that if not sunsetted, the tax would run through 2034.

Mr. Hamilton reviewed modifications made to the Commission's recommended five-year Preserve Improvements Plan, based on the City Treasurer's updated forecast. During his presentation he noted that some of the costs were escalated, some were moved from FY2024/25 to FY 2025/26, and some projects were combined. He noted that the plan is for five years, but the Commission is only approving year one of the plan; it is not uncommon to split a project over several years.

Commissioners asked clarifying questions throughout the presentation and were given an opportunity to ask additional questions following the presentation. In response to a question about moving signage over to the Prop 490 funding, Mr. Hamilton explained that Prop 490 is intended for operations. A comprehensive signage package will be part of the final Gateway Trailhead and Lost Dog Trailhead projects. Mr. Molinari explained that the role of the Commission is to recommend what the Commission perceives as the capital needs of the Preserve for the five-year plan based on Prop 490 sales tax projections, and without consideration for the potential sunset of the 2004 0.15 tax. If the Prop 490 sales tax projections were to come in low, the Commission could at that time prioritize the projects.

Discussion ensued regarding the Rio Verde Wildlife Crossing. Mr. Hamilton explained that there is no design plan yet, but a general location and characteristics recommendations have been made, including recommendations from the Arizona Game and Fish Department.

Mr. Molinari explained that staffing resources and project management resources have been identified in the Prop 490 funding for FY 2025/26, which will allow for hiring of personnel to specifically manage projects in the Preserve.

COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN MOVED TO APPROVE THE FUTURE ONE-TIME PRESERVE COSTS AND FIVE-YEAR PLAN PRIORITIES. COMMISSIONER LAYTON SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSHMAN, LAYTON, OLSSON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

7. PUBLIC SAFETY UPDATES

Assistant Fire Chief Kerry Swick provided an update on wildland fire risk reduction efforts, emphasizing the importance of prevention due to increasing risks. His presentation included an overview of wildland fire risk reduction mitigation efforts. He explained that wildland fire risk has grown largely because more people now live, work, and recreate in Wildland-Urban Interface areas. He reviewed brush fire data for 2023 and 2024, noting that brush fires are tracked both inside and outside the Preserve. It was noted that the City's Natural Area Open Space (NAOS) is equal to the size of the Preserve and that work is underway to track all NAOS areas using GIS. He described the fire department's year-round efforts, including updates to the Community Wildland Protection Plan and preventative strategies such as public engagement, fire-safe construction guidelines, and coordination with sanitation services for proper vegetation disposal.

Assistant Fire Chief Kerry Swick noted that a key challenge is with limited staffing, which makes it difficult to conduct proactive construction inspections. He has engaged a volunteer who is trained in inspections and is Firewise-approved to assist with safety assessments using the iPad tracking process. He highlighted the Hazardous Vegetation Assessment program; Ready, Set, Go emergency management; and Firewise programs. Chief Swick talked about the importance of the City's participation in the automatic aid system for emergency response.

In reference to a question about accountability, Chief Swick noted that the department is reinstituting on-site ticketing for code violations and that there are efforts to improve prosecution in arson cases and stricter enforcement for construction-related activities. The fire department is exploring more effective vegetation management in NAOS areas, including using drones to detect vegetation moisture levels.

Chief Swick said that he is unsure of exactly what the Mayor has in mind with the idea of a volunteer fire brigade. The impression he has gotten is that she is hoping to have volunteers help with firefighting. The fire department feels that the best tool is education and that volunteers would be best used in a prevention role rather than a firefighting position. A meeting is scheduled for March 19, 2025, to discuss the issue.

Commissioners asked clarifying questions that were answered throughout the presentation.

8. STAFF REPORTS

- **Carefree Fault Research Project**

Mr. Hamilton said that staff is waiting for information from the Arizona Geologic Survey regarding a start date. He implied that there is some uncertainty about the project, because it is primarily driven by the federal government.

- **Brown's Ranch Trailhead Update**

Mr. Hamilton said there are no updates on the Brown's Ranch Trailhead project. Staff still plans to reassemble the Trail Working Group and work through ideas during summer.

- **Asphalt Maintenance - Temporary Closures**

Mr. Hamilton said that public notice about the closures will be sent out soon. The Asphalt overlay work will be completed at Brown's Ranch on March 26th and at Lost Dog Wash on March 27th. Additional restrictions will be placed on both locations in the future in order to do the striping.

9. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS, AND AGENDA ITEMS

All Dates listed are tentative and subject to amendment:

- Regular Meetings – April 3rd (possible 10th; May 1st; June 5th)

Mr. Hamilton noted that April 3rd is a conflict with the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy Awards Banquet. It was the consensus of the Commission to reschedule the April 3rd meeting to April 10th.

10. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

There were no Commissioner comments.

11. ADJOURNMENT

COMMISSIONER ENGELKING MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SEVEN (7) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSHMAN, LAYTON, OLSSON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

With no further business to discuss, being duly moved and seconded, the meeting adjourned at 7:26 p.m.

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