



**CITY OF SCOTTSDALE
MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION
WORK STUDY SESSION AND REGULAR MEETING – MINUTES**

Thursday, September 4, 2025
Granite Reef Senior Center - Room 1
1700 N. Granite Reef Road
Scottsdale, AZ 85251

PRESENT: Chairperson Steve Coluccio, Vice-Chair Savannah Engelking, Commissioners Robert Hallagan, Pruitt Layton, Kerry Olsson, and Ryan Rybarczyk

ABSENT: Commissioner Susan Hirschman

STAFF: Nick Molinari, Senior Director; Madison Barasha, Acting Preserve Manager

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Coluccio called the meeting to order at 5:05 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as listed above.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT - NON-AGENDIZED ITEMS

Howard Myers, former MSPC Commissioner, made a recommendation that all meeting agenda items include the description “possible action item” so Commissioners have the option of taking action if desired. He noted that some of the trails in the northern part of the Preserve were built intentionally to be more rugged for bikers who wanted a more challenging experience. He opined that the intentional design could put the City in a position of liability if someone were to get hurt and suggested that the trails in the northern area be evaluated for safety.

Veronika Corcoran spoke about the privileges of living in the United States and of freedom of speech. She encouraged people to use their freedom of speech to support the preservation of the wild horses at Salt River.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of the Regular Meeting Minutes for June 5, 2025

COMMISSIONER OLSSON MOVED TO APPROVE THE JUNE 5, 2025, MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING MINUTES. COMMISSIONER RYBARCZYK SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, LAYTON, OLSSON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

5. STAFF REPORTS

- Staffing and Recruitment Updates

Nick Molinari, Senior Director, announced that Jenna Kohl has been selected as the new Preserve Director and will start in her position on September 22, 2025. He said that recruitment for the Preserve Manager position has closed, and application review and interviews will be conducted over the next several weeks. Recruitment for the executive assistant position is in progress, and recruitment for the project manager position that is in the 490 budget is expected to begin sometime in the fall.

6. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS, AND AGENDA ITEMS

All Dates listed are Tentative and subject to amendment:

- Regular Meetings – **October 16**; November 6

Future agenda items could include:

- Update on the wildlife feasibility study, game and fish projects, ERP projects
- Discussion about establishment of a fire recovery fund

7. COMMISSIONER COMMENTS

There were no Commissioner comments.

8. WORKS STUDY SESSION

The Scottsdale Wildhorse Sanctuary Proposal presentation by the Ad Hoc Citizen Committee.

The following citizens spoke in opposition to relocating a group of horses from the Salt River Community to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and conducting a feasibility study:

- Kate Conway, Founding Board Member of Protect Our Preserve, commented that relocating 40 to 60 horses to the Preserve would have serious financial ramifications for the City. Wild horses are incompatible with the Preserve and would displace native wildlife, and they would require ongoing food, veterinary care, fencing, and shade. Importing water to the area would be difficult and

damaging to the natural preserved land. Protecting wild horses is a worthy goal, but the McDowell Sonoran Preserve is not an appropriate location.

- Betty Janik, former Scottsdale Councilmember, commented about biomes that are unique to the Sonoran Desert and the effect that a changing environment can have. The natural land would be denuded by the foraging of native plants, trampling, and compaction of the land, damaging the area's natural biomes. She supported the Salt River Wildlife Management group's efforts to find a reasonable solution for the relocation of the wild horses.
- Paula Foley expressed concern that wild horses could present a danger to domesticated horses and the riders that are using the Preserve trails, and that they would destroy vegetation. She asked the Commission to encourage the City Council to come up with a different solution.
- Mary Manross, former Scottsdale Mayor, commented on the importance of listening to the experts who are saying that the McDowell Sonoran Preserve habitat would be forever changed if the wild horses are relocated to the Preserve.
- Holly Goldstein expressed concern about the lack of natural water sources and shade areas, the inappropriateness of steel shade structures, passthrough gates, barbed wire fencing, the lack of natural food sources, and the amount of manure that would be produced.
- John Koleszan talked about the 2019 Salt River Horse Collaborative, initiated by Governor Ducey, to remove horses from the Salt River area. He spoke about the desecration in the Salt River area surrounding the Salt River Management Group shed, noting that some of the horses should be removed and taken to sanctuaries, not to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. He opined that the City of Scottsdale would encounter enormous costs and liability.
- Mark Hackbarth, Former MSPC Commissioner, quoted Chapter 21 of the Scottsdale Revised Code: "The Preserve will be left in as pristine a state as possible." Section 21.17 of the Scottsdale Revised Code which states that no person shall permit any livestock or any other domesticated animals to run at large within the boundaries of the Preserve. It shall be unlawful for any person owning or controlling any livestock to graze or pasture such livestock upon any lands within the Preserve. "The Preserve Director," he continued, "shall have the authority to make such rules and regulations as are necessary to manage, use, preserve, and govern the preserve and the activities that are the subject of this chapter and shall do so with the assistance of the commission." He urged the Commission to put up a fire wall to prevent this travesty.
- Cynthia Wenstrom, Former MSPC Commissioner, spoke about the importance of protecting the Preserve from special interest groups. She stressed that the Preserve is for indigenous wildlife and that there is no water or shelter available for the wild horses, who would overgraze the desert, impacting the environment of the natural Preserve. She encouraged the State of Arizona to look at the problem carefully, noting that the citizens of Scottsdale should not be responsible for caring for these wild horses.
- Howard Myers, Former MSPC Commissioner, commented that moving the wild horses to the Preserve would be bad for Scottsdale, for the Preserve, and for the horses. The move would violate the intent of the Preserve that was voted on by Scottsdale citizens, and the City would have to find money to fund the project because Preserve funds cannot be used. He noted that Prop 420 and legal

restrictions on the land do not allow a horse sanctuary to be built in the Preserve without going to voters. He opined that moving the horses away from the Salt River would have a negative effect on their health.

- Michael Kirwin advocated for keeping the wild horses at the Salt River and away from the Preserve where they would not have the resources needed and would destroy the natural area.
- Carla, Preserve Pioneer, encouraged the Commission to listen to the information provided by the Arizona Game and Fish Department about the damage that would be done to the Preserve if the proposal were to go forward. She said that the claim that there were wild horses wandering all over the area before it became a Preserve is false. She noted that for decades there were cattle ranches in the area and no wild horses, though one rancher did release his ranch horses for feeding. She mentioned the legal concerns that prevent relocating the horses to the Preserve, including that it violates the City charter and the State Conservation Easement. Most importantly, she said that the creators of the Preserve Ordinance ensured that there could be no exceptions to the ordinance. She asked Commissioners to speak for the Preserve and the ordinance and give a strong consensus direction to staff about why a feasibility study is not needed.

The following citizens submitted written comments in opposition to relocating a group of horses from the Salt River Community to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and conducting a feasibility study:

- Laura McFarland
- Rand Hubbell, Former MSPC Commissioner

The following citizens spoke in support of relocating a group of horses from the Salt River Community to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and conducting a feasibility study:

- Tina Hillstrom spoke in support of relocating some of the Salt River wild horses to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.
- Don Hesselbrock submitted a written comment in support of relocating some of the Salt River wild horses to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

Lisa Borowsky, City of Scottsdale Mayor, thanked the Commission for taking time to preliminarily vet the idea of moving horses from the Salt River to the Preserve. She explained that leaving all of the wild horses at Salt River is not an option, and the idea was brought to her because the Department of Agriculture has issued a mandate that a minimum of 180 of the 280 horses be extricated from their habitat at the Salt River. She noted that domestic horses that are dropped off near the Salt River are quickly removed. She opined that the idea warrants a comprehensive study, noting that it is important to bring awareness to the conversation.

Len Sherman gave a presentation on behalf of the Ad Hoc Citizen Committee, outlining the proposal to authorize a feasibility study on relocating a group of horses from the Salt River Community to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. He explained current plans to put the Salt River horses up for auction. He outlined the proposal, which would require that approximately 10 acres per horse be designated as well as potential solutions for bringing in water, providing shade and fencing, and caring for the animals. He stated the Preserve ordinance and restrictions relating to the Preserve could be changed to

accommodate the change. He said marketing and social media could be used to draw tourism dollars to the area. If the horses are moved and the City of Scottsdale does not want to fund the move or their care, a 501(c)(3) organization could be formed to raise money for the horses' care. He agreed the City would be held responsible and liable for the horses and their actions.

Commissioners were given an opportunity to ask questions and make comments. Discussion included the following:

- Why the Department of Agriculture is against the horses staying at Salt River
- Natural attrition and birth control
- Setting precedent for similar requests in the future
- Mr. Sherman offered to provide the Commission with a list of current members
- The Ad Hoc Committee's comment that the presence of wild horses would not impact the land in any way
- City Charter and the Conservation Easement prohibitions regarding this type of use.
- Providing water to the northern area of the Preserve.
- Inclusion of amenities to house, water, feed, and provide medical care and other supplies to the herd
- Contradictions with the Conservation Easement agreement between the City of Scottsdale and the Department of Agriculture.
- Tourism draw
- Improvements to 136th Street
- Investigating alternative solutions
- Fire mitigation and the expected process for rescuing horses if there were to be a wildfire in the area.
- Liability of the City in instances where the wild horses encounter equestrians, trail users, or encounter a vehicle and cause damage or loss of life
- Possible effect on cultural natural resources

Mayor Borowsky said that she has scheduled a meeting with Governor Katie Hobbs' office to discuss the topic. She indicated that she is also working to connect with mayors of other Valley cities, the county, and other Arizona municipalities to consider alternate solutions. She encouraged the Commission to support the feasibility study so that more information can be obtained.

Chair Coluccio clarified that the Commission supports the wild horses and hopes they end up in the best possible location. He noted that the Commission's primary responsibility is to protect the Preserve land, native wildlife, and native vegetation. He directed staff to agendize an actionable item about the wild horse relocation feasibility study for the October meeting.

9. ADJOURNMENT

COMMISSIONER OLSSON MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. VICE-CHAIR ENGLEKING SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, 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 6:57 p.m.

Recorded and Transcribed by eScribers, LLC.