Approved November 5, 2026

City of Scottsdale

McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission

Regular Meeting - Minutes

Thursday, October 1, 2026 – 5:00 p.m.
Via Linda Senior Center
10440 E. Via Linda
Scottsdale, AZ 85258

PRESENT: Chairperson Steve Coluccio, Vice-chair Savannah Engelking, Commissioners Robert Hallagan, Susan Hirshman, Pruitt Layton, and Ryan Rybarczyk

ABSENT: Cynthia Wenstrom

STAFF: Preserve Director Jenna Kohl; Preserve Manager Justin Eddinger; and Project Coordinator Stephany Sheekey; Kevin Bingham, Police Sergeant Park Ranger Unit; Hayden Scott, Police Park Ranger; and Zach Navarro, Finance Analyst Senior.

1. CALL TO ORDER

Chair Coluccio called the meeting to order at 5:00 p.m.

2. ROLL CALL

Members present as listed above.

3. PUBLIC COMMENT

There were no members of the public who wished to speak.

4. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

Approval of the Regular Meeting minutes of September 3, 2026.

COMMISSIONER RYBARCZYK MOVED TO APPROVE THE SEPTEMBER 3, 2026 MCDOWELL SONORAN PRESERVE COMMISSION REGULAR MEETING MINUTES AS PRESENTED. COMMISSIONER LAYTON SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, AND HIRSHMAN VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. COMMISSIONER WENSTROM WAS NOT PRESENT. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

5. UPDATE FROM PARK RANGERS AND INTRO TO K9 PLOY

Sgt. Kevin Bingham provided an update on the Park Ranger Unit, which has operated for three years, is funded through the Parks & Preserve Tax, and provides coverage for City parks and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.

Sgt. Bingham discussed the unit's collaboration with the Scottsdale Police and Fire departments through the Scottsdale Search and Rescue (COSSAR) team. The long-term goal is to expand regional search and rescue capabilities over the next three to five years. Sgt. Bingham explained that K9 Ploy is trained as a live-find dog, detecting airborne human scent over large areas while working off-leash, and that the program also includes human-remains detection dogs.

Sgt. Bingham reported that three officers have been selected to join the unit, pending citywide staffing needs. The long-term staffing goal is six officers and one sergeant. Additional priorities include expanding drone training and use, increasing use of the LOCATE program, and utilizing drone-based technology to identify electronic devices associated with missing-person searches.

Operational updates included continued challenges associated with e-bike use and the need for public education, enforcement efforts related to fireworks during the July 4 holiday, and ongoing emphasis on hydration and heat safety. Staff are also addressing recurring trespassing at Brown's Trailhead during construction through signage and coordinated patrols.

Commission Questions and Discussion

Chair Coluccio asked about the anticipated staffing timeline and whether the program included a tracking dog. Sgt. Bingham clarified that the program does not currently include a tracking dog and that live-find canine capabilities, combined with technology, support efficient area searches.

Commissioner Hallagan asked about incidents in the Preserve, staff integration, and civilian volunteer participation. Sgt. Bingham stated that no serious or felony-level incidents occurred during the summer and explained that Police and Fire continue to evaluate opportunities for volunteer participation. He also noted the proactive use of trail cameras to address reported safety concerns.

Vice-Chair Engelking asked whether the unit required Commission support or additional training resources. Sgt. Bingham stated that the city has been supportive and welcomed suggestions regarding training and program development.

6. STAFF REPORT

Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director, provided a staff update regarding Preserve Month activities and administrative developments. She introduced Senior Finance Analyst Zachary Navarro as a new resource supporting Preserve operations. She confirmed that weathered trail rule signs throughout the Preserve have been replaced to improve consistency and clarity for visitors.

7. OLD BUSINESS: LAND ACQUISITION CRITERIA

The Commission continued its discussion of the land acquisition evaluation criteria. Chair Coluccio noted that Commissioners had submitted their initial criteria and that Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director,

had consolidated the recommendations into a framework aligned with the City Charter and Code. Ms. Kohl presented the updated criteria.

Commissioner Hirshman requested clarification to be added to the document regarding the distinction between donated and purchased properties, noting that feasibility considerations may differ by acquisition method.

Vice-Chair Engelking commented on weighing financial returns versus social returns which are a benefit to the people. Commissioner Rybarczyk commented that the proposed framework provides greater clarity for future acquisition decisions. Commissioner Hallagan requested that the document explicitly address public comment.

Chair Coluccio requested clarification regarding the meaning of “risk and vulnerability” and recommended consolidating the terminology related to parcel connectivity and alignment with the Study Boundary. Commissioner Hallagan also requested clarification of the official definition of the Study Boundary.

Vice-Chair Engelking asked whether the criteria were intended to prevent the acquisition of small, isolated parcels. Jenna Kohl explained that such parcels remain subject to evaluation if they fall within the Study Boundary. Commissioner Layton asked how the criteria would address parcels that are unaffordable to purchase but potentially available through donation. Jenna Kohl confirmed that the acquisition method and associated feasibility considerations would be addressed in Step 3. Carla provided historical context regarding Study Boundary maps having been presented to the Council and Commission.

Next Steps

Jenna Kohl will revise the evaluation framework to clarify public comment procedures, define the Study Boundary, distinguish feasibility from return on investment, clarify acquisition methods, and simplify the criteria chart. The Commission will review the revised framework at its next meeting and may consider adoption at that time.

8. TRAILHEAD DESIGN PHILOSOPHIES

Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director, presented the Design Philosophies for Trailhead Improvements, a guiding document intended to inform future trailhead enhancement projects while protecting the natural integrity, character, and long-term stewardship of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. She noted that the revised draft incorporated feedback from Commissioners and staff, including Jesus Murillo, Senior Planner.

Jenna Kohl reviewed the document’s guiding principles, including compliance with governing requirements, minimal site disturbance, ecological protection, architectural consistency, use of native and contextually appropriate materials, visitor safety and comfort, educational opportunities, and long-term maintenance. She emphasized that improvements must comply with City Charter Section 8 and Scottsdale Revised Code Chapter 21.

Additional design considerations include habitat and native plant protection, integration with the surrounding landscape, accessibility, heat management, low-impact lighting, wildlife-safe features, durable materials, and stormwater resilience. Interpretive and educational elements should support visitor understanding and stewardship of the Preserve. Ms. Kohl also emphasized the importance of evaluating maintenance requirements and long-term funding needs when planning improvements.

Commission Questions and Discussion

Chair Coluccio expressed support for the document and its comprehensive approach. Commissioner Hallagan asked whether Parks and Recreation standards had been incorporated. Jenna Kohl explained that Preserve-specific requirements necessitated a tailored approach. Commissioner Hirshman referenced previous discussions regarding the distinction between preserves and recreational areas.

Vice-Chair Engelking asked about cultural considerations, and Jenna Kohl said that doing an archeological assessment infers that but agreed that it could be identified more clearly.

The Commission also discussed shade structures and restrictions on constructing new trailheads.

Commission Action

COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN MOVED TO APPROVED DOCUMENT WITH PLANNING ADDITIONS AND LEGAL CONSIDERATIONS. VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSCHMAN, LAYTON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

9. SPECIAL USE PERMIT REQUEST

Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director, presented the Special Use Permit request for the 15th Annual McDowell Mountain Frenzy Run, scheduled for December 5. She reported that the event routes remain unchanged from the previous year and that no significant incidents have occurred historically. As a competitive event, the run requires a Special Use Permit in accordance with Scottsdale Revised Code Chapter 21 and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Special Use Permit Guidelines. Kohl confirmed that all required documentation had been submitted and reviewed. Permit fees consist of an administrative fee and a per-participant use fee, consistent with the fee structure for guiding services.

Commissioner Hallagan referenced previous Commission discussions regarding trail impacts and noted that runners spread out before reaching Thompson Peak, resulting in no significant trail impacts. Vice-Chair Engelking asked about medical and safety provisions. Event Director Aaron Barber explained that participants are required to sign waivers, Medstar is contracted to provide medical support. Sweepers follow the final runner to remove event signage and support participant safety. Chair Coluccio commented that the event has historically been well managed and that no public complaints have been received.

Mr. Barber reported that the event typically operates from approximately 7 a.m. to 10 p.m. and that setup and breakdown are completed within a total period of 16 hours. He confirmed that the event does not take place in the Preserve after dark.

Commission Action

Following discussion and review of the applicable guidelines and policies, the Commission unanimously recommended that the Preserve Director approve a Special Use Permit for the 15th Annual McDowell Mountain Frenzy Run.

COMMISSIONER HALLAGAN MOVED TO APPROVE. COMMISSIONER HIRSHMAN SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSCHMAN, LAYTON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

10. PRESERVE FY27/28 CAPITAL BUDGET DISCUSSION

Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director, reviewed the FY 2027/28 budget calendar

Stephany Sheekey, Project Coordinator, discussed aging infrastructure and provided an overview of the internal five-year capital plan. Major project areas include Gateway, Tom's Thumb, and the Rio Verde Wildlife Corridor.

Commission Questions and Discussion

Commissioner Hallagan asked whether preservation sales tax revenues were exceeding forecasts due to inflation. Zachary Navarro stated that he was reviewing the forecasting models.

Chair Coluccio asked about potential changes in related tax collections reflected in the presentation. Jenna Kohl recommended placing sales tax revenue and land acquisition funding strategy on a future agenda for further discussion.

Commissioner Hallagan noted that improvements at Tom's Thumb primarily involve water infrastructure, while Chair Coluccio highlighted solar maintenance needs at Lost Dog Wash.

The preliminary capital plan anticipates investments across multiple trailheads during FY 2027–2032, with projected expenditures increasing as major construction phases advance. Staff noted that estimates will be refined as project scopes and designs are developed.

Commission Action

The Commission accepted the FY 2027/28 capital plan and budget as presented.

CHAIR COLUCCIO MOVED TO APPROVE AS PROPOSED, COMMISSIONER LAYTON SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, HIRSCHMAN, LAYTON, AND RYBARCZYK VOTED IN THE AFFIRMATIVE. THERE WERE NO DISSENTING VOTES.

11. COMMISSIONER COMMENT

Commissioner Layton expressed concern regarding wildfire impacts, erosion, and flooding across the Preserve. He stated that flooding should be explicitly incorporated into the Preserve's restoration plan, noting that flood damage can be just as significant as fire damage. He emphasized the need to plan for flooding impacts across the entire Preserve, not only in post-fire areas.

Justin Eddinger, Preserve Manager, responded that flooding considerations are referenced and noted in internal discussions and meetings. He clarified that flood impacts are part of the broader management considerations related to resource protection and restoration planning.

Jenna Kohl, Preserve Director, added that flooding is addressed within erosion-related components of the restoration framework, particularly as it relates to how water flow patterns may shift following disturbances.

12. UPCOMING MEETING DATES, LOCATIONS AND AGENDA ITEMS

Regular Meeting: November 5, 2026 at Granite Reef Senior Center

Potential agenda items include:

- Rio Verde Wildlife Corridor and Pedestrian Trail Report
- Prop 490 Budget Discussion
- Rates & Fees Review

13. ADJOURNMENT 7:02 P.M.

COMMISSIONER HIRSHMAN MOVED TO ADJOURN THE MEETING. VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING SECONDED THE MOTION, WHICH CARRIED SIX (6) TO ZERO (0) BY ROLL CALL VOTE. CHAIR COLUCCIO, VICE-CHAIR ENGELKING, COMMISSIONERS HALLAGAN, LAYTON, HIRSHMAN 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 7:02 p.m.

Persons who require a reasonable modification based on language or a disability may request a reasonable accommodation by contacting Rosalind Williams at 480-312-2304. Requests should be made 24 hours in advance, or as early as possible to allow time to arrange accommodation. For TTY users, the Arizona Relay Service (1-800-367-8939) may contact the Parks & Recreation and Preserve Department (480-312-2304).

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