



Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection

300 E. University Blvd., Suite 120
Tucson, Arizona 85705
p (520) 388-9925 • f (520) 791-7709
www.sonorandesert.org

November 15, 2013

Arizona Center for Law
in the Public Interest

Arizona League of Conservation
Voters Education Fund

Arizona Native Plant Society

Bat Conservation International

Cascabel Conservation
Association

Center for Biological Diversity

Center for Environmental
Connections

Center for Environmental Ethics

Defenders of Wildlife

Desert Watch

Drylands Institute

Empire Fagan Coalition

Environmental and Cultural
Conservation Organization

Environmental Law Society

Friends of Cabeza Prieta

Friends of Ironwood Forest

Friends of Madiera Canyon

Friends of Saguaro National
Park

Friends of Tortolita

Gates Pass Area Neighborhood
Association

Native Seeds/SEARCH

Neighborhood Coalition of
Greater Tucson

Northwest Neighborhoods
Alliance

Protect Land and
Neighborhoods

Safford Peak Watershed
Education Team

Save the Scenic Santa Ritas

Sierra Club—Grand Canyon
Chapter

Sierra Club—Rincon Group

Silverbell Mountain Alliance

Sky Island Alliance

Sky Island Watch

Society for Ecological
Restoration

Sonoran Arthropod
Studies Institute

Sonoran Permaculture Guild

Southwestern Biological
Institute

Tortolita Homeowners
Association

Tucson Audubon Society

Tucson Herpetological Society

Tucson Mountains Association

Wildlands Network

Women for Sustainable
Technologies

Chairman Ramón Valadez and Members
Pima County Board of Supervisors
130 W. Congress, 11th Floor
Tucson, AZ 85701

RE: August 27, 2013 Memo from County Administrator C.H. Huckelberry to the Board of Supervisors

Dear Chairman Valadez and Board Members,

This letter is a response to the memo submitted by County Administrator C.H. Huckelberry to the Board on August 27, 2013 entitled "Comprehensive Plan Amendments Along Thornydale Road within the Northwest Area of Unincorporated Pima County" (attached).

The August 27th memo outlines the County Administrator's position regarding four proposed Comprehensive Plan Amendments, all by Red Point Development, Inc., on or near Thornydale Road and currently under consideration by the County. Mr. Huckelberry's memo asserts that while all four of these properties are located within the Maeveen Marie Behan Conservation Lands System (CLS), they should not be required to comply with the CLS given the de-listing of the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl and their locations "surrounded on three sides by already dense urban development with no set-asides."

Mr. Huckelberry proposes that in lieu of full CLS compliance, a "significant open space contribution" on one of the properties could serve as mitigation for all four properties. He further asserts that since the properties will also be required to be in compliance with Clean Water Act Section 404 regulations, "requiring each individual property to conform to the CLS...makes little sense from reserve design and overall ecosystem protection and productivity."

We would like to present a different perspective on these four properties. The Coalition strongly believes that there are multiple reasons why all of these properties should be required to be in full compliance with the CLS. We present these reasons below.

1. Regardless of whether the cactus ferruginous pygmy-owl is currently listed as a threatened or endangered species, it is important to remember that it is a covered species under Pima County's Multiple-Species Conservation Plan (MSCP), currently under final consideration by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. By including the pygmy-owl in its MSCP, the County is expressing its belief that this species has the potential to be listed over the 30-year planning timeframe of the MSCP. It makes sense, therefore, to exercise consistency in decision-making and protect the remaining habitat for this species or, at the very least, require mitigation when the habitat is impacted. Continuing to protect pygmy-owl habitat is also a show of good faith to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service as they consider granting the County a 30-year Section 10 Incidental Take Permit in the near future.

2. The overarching goal of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan is to “ensure the long-term survival of the full spectrum of plants and animals that are indigenous to Pima County through maintaining or improving the habitat conditions or ecosystem functions necessary for their survival.” The ironwood-saguaro habitat, the type of habitat present in this part of the County, is the Sonoran Desert’s “old-growth.” The Desert Ironwood tree (*Olneya tesota*) is a keystone species, an anchor that makes other life possible; Nabhan and Holdsworth report that more than 600 species of plants and animals rely upon the desert “tree of life” at some point in their life cycle. Moreover, Ironwood trees act as “nurse plants” for saguaros and other species while remaining a food source for animals.

To successfully implement the SDCP’s goal of protecting the “full spectrum of plants and animals” in the Sonoran Desert, impacts to ironwood-saguaro habitat need to be fully mitigated, either through on-site open space set-asides or through off-site mitigation.

3. When the Habitat Protection Priorities were developed by The Nature Conservancy and Arizona Open Land Trust (now ALWT), they recognized the significant conservation value of the northwest side. In particular, they made a pointed exception in this area to the “10 acre in size minimum” applied to the rest of the HPPs in the County. They recognized that smaller parcels in the northwest are particularly important to retaining connectivity and should be pursued for acquisition and/or protection in the same manner as larger parcels and ranches in other parts of the County. The four parcels currently under consideration for Comprehensive Plan Amendments are exactly these types of parcels. Even though they are small and adjacent to developed parcels, they still have conservation value and impacts to them should be fully mitigated.
4. In a 2008 Pima County report entitled, “Progress Report: Measuring Effectiveness of Open Space Land Acquisitions in Pima County, Arizona in Relation to the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan” (Fonseca and Jones, 2008), STAT Special Elements were analyzed and ironwood forest habitat fell short of protection goals. The report states, “Considering the amount of regional protection recommended by the STAT (Table 1) and the distribution of the special elements relative to the non-County reserve system, acquisitions of ironwood forest, saltbush, and talus slopes have been underrepresented in the County program.” The reason given for this underrepresentation of ironwood forest habitat was the inability to purchase State Trust Land. In addition, the Pima County Administrator has been unwilling to purchase lands in the northwest due to costs. These facts together underline the importance to protect acreage through adherence to CLS minimum guidelines in this habitat type.
5. The County has developed both on-site and off-site mitigation options for property owners developing in the CLS. If the Board decides that on-site mitigation does not make sense for the parcels in question, off-site mitigation, or a combination of on-site and off-site mitigation, can be used to reach full CLS compliance. The Coalition is supportive of creative solutions that recognize development constraints and surrounding properties while also achieving full CLS compliance.
6. Pima County has required full CLS compliance on other parcels in this area. In order to exercise consistency and provide certainty for future proposals, the County should continue to support conservation and CLS compliance in this area. The Board should fully consider the implications of any precedents set by not requiring full CLS compliance and the

ramifications of such precedents for future proposals and landowners that have already fully complied with the CLS.

7. Multiple parcels within the CLS also have a) 404 washes and b) regulated riparian habitat subject to the regulations of Pima County's Riparian Habitat Ordinance. While the County Administrator seems to imply that the presence of 404 washes means CLS compliance should not be required, we strongly disagree. CLS guidelines address issues such as connectivity and are part of a broader vision of protected and connected Sonoran Desert throughout Pima County. These guidelines, and the science that went into them, cannot be equated with an entirely different process and set of regulations.

We appreciate the Board's consideration of the Coalition's position on these four Comprehensive Plan Amendment proposals. We are able and willing to work further with the County and Red Point Development to develop creative solutions that will achieve full CLS compliance. While the County Administrator did outline an option of preserving significant open space on one of the parcels as mitigation for all four of them, "significant open space" set-aside of at least 80% is the CLS guideline for *all four* of these properties. Thus, the acreage presented in his attached map falls far short to satisfy CLS guidelines.

Thank you again and if you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me.

Sincerely,



Carolyn Campbell
Executive Director

Cc: C.H. Huckelberry, Pima County Administrator
Arlan Colton, Planning Director, Pima County Development Services