



The Basics

What is the Desert Discovery Center?

Scottsdale's Desert Discovery Center (DDC) is envisioned as an interpretive, education and research center intended to complement the McDowell Sonoran Preserve experience and be a focal point for understanding human interaction with arid environments. At this point, the City of Scottsdale is in the project planning phase for the DDC concept to determine what elements should be included, how large it might be and how much it would cost to build and operate.

Where will the Desert Discovery Center be located?

The City Council has authorized further development of the DDC concept at the Gateway Trailhead located within Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve. The Gateway location for the DDC was approved by the City Council in 2007 as part of the Gateway Municipal Use Master Site Plan (MUMSP). The Gateway Trailhead is located on relatively flat land, pulled away from the mountain slopes. The process for reviewing the site plan and design for the DDC at the Gateway will be a proposed site amendment to the MUMSP, which will be considered by the City Council through the public hearing process.

The location is the key issue and source of opposition to the DDC. Citizens formed the Preserve specifically to prevent development on preserved land and voted to tax themselves twice to buy the land, but now the city wants to build this tourist attraction on the land citizens paid to preserve, without a vote of citizens to either build it or use funds raised to buy land to build it.

How is the proposed project being paid for?

The construction of the DDC is not currently approved or funded. In January 2016, the Scottsdale City Council approved creating a business plan and feasibility analysis for the DDC concept and selecting an architect to create conceptual site and floor plans, as well as preliminary building designs. These contracts were funded by \$1.7 million in bed tax dollars – money paid by visitors who rent rooms at Scottsdale's resorts and hotels. Bed tax dollars can only be spent on projects that support tourism in Scottsdale.

One of the reasons why they want to build it in the Preserve is to be able to use Preserve funds to pay for it. Those funds were raised to buy land and build some trails and trail heads to support public access, not build a tourist attraction.

What is the City currently doing?

The current planning effort has three major elements as a result of the January 2016 City Council Meeting:

1. Create a business plan and feasibility analysis for the Desert Discovery Center. This work will be done by Desert Discovery Center Scottsdale (DDCS), a nonprofit entity hired by the City. In addition, the DDCS is

conducting public outreach and exploring the fundraising potential of the project with the goal of offsetting the need for public dollars.

In the only 2 public outreach meetings held, the DDCS has stated they will not accept any comments on the location of the DDC, which is the major concern expressed by the vast majority of the attendees.

2. Begin the process to amend the City site plan at the Gateway Trailhead, which would be necessary if the Desert Discovery Center is built there.

How can a site plan be developed or amended until there is a plan showing how big the DDC will be and projecting how much additional parking will be required?

3. Hire an architect to create conceptual site and floor plans and preliminary building designs.

All plans developed are to be specific to the Gateway location, thus eliminating the possibility of locating it anywhere else. In other words they are forcing it into the Gateway before they know how big it will be, how it will be operated, how it will or will not conform to the Preserve Ordinance.

When will it be built?

The current planning phase of the project will be complete in August 2017. Upon completion, it will be up to the City Council to determine if they want to move forward with the project.

What elements will be included in the DDC concept and how big it will be?

The exact size and design for the DDC is what we are in the process of determining. The DDCS will develop the recommended concept, building upon the work that has emerged from multiple previous studies, reconsidering all aspects in terms of a new economy, new partners and a new vision. This includes expanding on the extensive public outreach done for the Phase II study in 2010.

The 2010 DDC concept called for several, small-scale linked pavilions on the site, and that is the starting point for the current evaluation. Although the City has identified 30 acres as the current study area, the entire area would not likely be utilized. The vision is for the DDC to be built on a minimalist footprint that reflects the vision for this project – “to educate and inspire people to value and thrive in desert environments through transformative experiences based on global scientific study.”

The 2010 plan, used as the basis for the new plan, had about 72,000 square feet of buildings and cost about \$75 million dollars. It was also projected to lose \$1.6 million dollars per year.

How do I stay informed about the Desert Discovery Center’s progress?

Visit ScottsdaleAZ.gov and search “DDC.” There you can get information on the project and if you’d like to be added to our mailing list, sign up.

More useful links are below.

The actual link to the city’s DDC page is: <http://www.scottsdaleaz.gov/construction/desert-discovery-center>.

The link to the Desert Discovery Center Scottsdale Inc. (DDCS), the organization that is coming up with the new plan, web site is: <http://www.scottsdalecenter.com/>.

The link to the Protect Our Preserve, the organization trying to inform residents and get the DDC outside the Preserve, web site is: <http://protectourpreserve.org/>.

History/Preserve

How long has the DDC been planned?

The DDC educational/interpretive center concept has been a part of community conversations for more than 30 years. Early Preserve discussions include City planning documents and publications dating back to the McDowell Mountain Task Force in 1993. Several City Council actions over the past 20 years have acknowledged or accepted reports locating the DDC at the Gateway to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. Over the past 20 years the DDC concept has been discussed in numerous City meetings, open houses and community conversations. The concept has evolved from that of a basic information center into a global center focused on tourism, research, education and policies regarding sustainable living in arid environments.

The DDC was originally going to be located at Pinnacle Peak Park, but when the land was dedicated for the park, there was not enough room for even parking much less the DDC. The city eventually had to buy some land for parking but not enough to support a DDC. In 1997 the DDC was relocated to the Preserve in the area of the Gateway trail head. This was done by tourism staff and even the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission (the city citizen board responsible for all matters relating to the Preserve) were not informed this was done. When it was learned that it was moved to the Preserve, the concept was downsized to be a very small building footprint and the idea of including concessions was a major issue. There was thought that it could be compatible with the Preserve. The early plans mentioned above, talked about armadas, picnic areas, etc. all of which were later prohibited by the Preserve Ordinance which was drafted to prevent the Preserve from being morphed into a park. In 2000, the Preserve ordinance was drafted and approved by the MSPC and city council. It had rules in it established that specifically prohibited concessions, nighttime operations, sound amplification, liquor, etc. all things they wanted to be included in the DDC. There were NO exclusions or exceptions in the ordinance to accommodate the DDC or anything like it. In 2008, the concept of the DDC changed from the Preserve being the educational experience to the DDC being a destination experience by itself and the DDC being the experience. This is when it was clearly no longer compatible with the Preserve and didn't belong in the Preserve.

I thought this was a preserve and building wasn't allowed?

Citizens and visitors, through their sales tax dollars, paid for the Preserve. Providing access for everyone, has and always will be, an important Preserve goal, including access for those who do not hike, bike or horseback ride. There are currently 11 access areas, four with existing trailhead buildings, and a few smaller maintenance sheds in the Preserve. Two more trailhead facilities are currently in the design stages.

Public access was NOT always considered, but was added as a goal in the late 1990s. The first sales tax was ONLY for land acquisition. The 2nd sales tax increase included language that allowed some of the money to be used to provide "appropriate" public access which was to be composed ONLY of trails and trail heads. Access to someone who had no intention or desire to hike, bike, ride a horse, or climb rocks in the Preserve was never mentioned or intended as there was no valid reason to bring people into the Preserve who didn't want to experience it. However there are interpretative trails, and some small amphitheaters for lectures, that are both ADA compatible, allowing ANYONE to access them. There are 4 interpretative trails, 3 of them ADA compatible, all at different trail heads. One is at the Gateway. There are also educational hikes and lectures run by the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy, that provide additional education experiences in the Preserve and that all conform to the Preserve Ordinance.

How do we ensure that the Desert Discovery Center will maintain the integrity of the Scottsdale's McDowell Sonoran Preserve?

The DDC concept is intended to complement the experience of the Preserve, encourage preservation and instill a sense of harmony and respect for the desert. DDC facilities and programs would be compatible with Scottsdale's Preserve Ordinance. As a model for sustainability, the DDC would be desert-sensitive and low-scale. The goal would be for visitors to gain an increased understanding of why preservation and conservation is so important.

NONE of the previous plans conformed to the Preserve Ordinance, specifically in that all of them wanted concessions that are specifically prohibited by the rules in the Preserve Ordinance. From what we have been told, the new plan will not conform to the Preserve Ordinance either so this statement is a bold lie. The integrity of the Preserve can ONLY be maintained by completely conforming to the Preserve Ordinance and the rules in it that were specifically drafted to protect the Preserve and prevent it from becoming a park.

If built at the Gateway, will any of the existing trails be eliminated to make way for the Desert Discovery Center?

No trails will be eliminated. There might be some minor rerouting to the Desert Park Trail, but the experience on that trail, as a connector to the DC Ranch Village Health Club and Spa, will remain the same. The Phase II concept locates the DDC north of the existing public trailhead building.

Rerouting of trails will be necessary to separate the paying public going to the DDC from the non paying public that are there to just enjoy the Preserve. Unless the entire DDC is contained in one large building, there will also need to be some sort of barriers to separate the DDC from the rest of the Preserve, another reason why it doesn't belong in the Preserve. The last plan for the DDC had many buildings that were part of it thus requiring some sort of barriers to separate DDC visitors from Preserve users.

Funding/Operation

What will the DDC cost?

The ultimate cost of the DDC will not be determined until the final planning and design of the facility is complete.

True, but each version of the DDC has grown in cost and the last one, that is used as the starting point for the current studies, cost \$74 million dollars and was projected to lose \$1.6 million per year, even with over optimistic estimates of attendance.

How would the construction of the Desert Discovery Center be funded?

Private and public funding sources for the project are currently being studied and evaluated. One source is the City's bed tax dollars, which are generated by tourism specifically for projects of this nature. The DDC is envisioned as a public/not-for-profit partnership with private sector dollars supplementing the City's investment. DDCS already has raised funds and the recently approved City contract requires the DDCS to raise an additional \$270,000 in private funds and in-kind contributions for this phase of the project's implementation and commits the private sector to a goal of raising at least 10 percent of DDC capital costs.

What is not mentioned is the desire to use Preserve funds to pay for the design and construction of the DDC. This has always been discussed as the major source of funding. It is totally misleading to not even mention that

source when it has always been viewed as a major source, even before the 2nd public vote that allowed some of the Preserve funds to be used for “improvements thereto”.

How will the Desert Discovery Center be financially sustained if it is built?

The DDC is planned to be self-sustaining and would include an annual development funding goal, in addition to earned revenue, memberships and corporate/individual giving. A capital campaign to include a three-year operating reserve and the beginning of an endowment is envisioned. A resilient DDC would be an important component of the City’s economic development strategies.

Fiscal sustainability has always been a BIG issue with the larger versions of the DDC that have emerged since 2008. The last version was projected to lose \$1.6 million per year and that is with overly optimistic projections of attendance that have been refuted by independent studies and there were roughly 2 times the paid attendance at the Desert Botanical Garden, a very well known and attended existing facility.

Who will own and run the Desert Discovery Center?

The City of Scottsdale would own the land, buildings and infrastructure for the DDC. However, it is envisioned that a private operator would be under contract to run the facility on a daily basis, providing programs, experiential exhibits, volunteers and staff. This model for a public/private partnership is used to run facilities such as Western Spirit: Scottsdale’s Museum of the West.

If located in the Preserve, the city MUST own it and run it, and absorb any losses. There are also lots of restrictions on what it can be and how it can be operated in order to appear compatible with the Preserve and Preserve Ordinance. If located outside the Preserve, anyone could own it, anyone could operate it, and it could be managed anyway it needs to be to make it sustainable because it would not have any of the Preserve restrictions imposed on it. The Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson is a typical example of a private entity that does reasonably well and is successful. The financial status of the Museum of the West is still unknown. Numbers released for the first year make it appear to break even, but this is typical of the first year as they count on memberships, initial grants, and higher than normal initial attendance. We need to track it over the next few years to see if it stays break even or costs the city money.

Will the DDC be a commercial operation?

No, the DDC will be a municipal use, managed and operated by a not-for-profit organization. Many of the municipal use facilities that we enjoy as citizens, provided to us by our City are not commercial operations (parks, museums, civic plazas, libraries, educational programs, etc.).

This is a very liberal interpretation of the word “commercial”. It requires users to PAY for attendance, has a café and gift shop and will have a large paid staff. It would be difficult to say this is not a “commercial” operation only because it is owned by the city and may be run by a non-profit organization. By any reasonable definition of “commercial” that is exactly what it is.

Community

I live in the neighborhood. Why haven't I heard about the Desert Discovery Center?

The DDC has been conceived, studied and discussed in the community since the mid-80s. In January 2016, the City of Scottsdale voted to move forward with the next stage of planning for the DDC, including hiring an architect to develop schematic plans. This is why you are now starting to hear more about the DDC. In the coming months, there will be a great deal of public outreach and many opportunities to ask questions and learn more.

You haven't heard about it because it has intentionally been kept from the public. It may have started in 1986 but it wasn't moved to the Preserve until 1997 and has been studied at least 5 times prior to the current study, yet the public has not been informed. Since it has been known since 1997 that the DDC may be built at the Gateway, when you bought your house, you should have been informed that this may be built in the Preserve near your house because it may impact your property values if it is, but that did not appear to happen. Part of the goal to keep this out of the eyes of the public because they know the public will not be in favor of it. The public outreach conducted so far has not been well advertised, and the attendees have been clear they don't want the DDC at the Gateway, but those concerns have been intentionally ignored. So much for public outreach.

How will the Desert Discovery Center affect traffic in the area?

Bell Road and Thompson Peak Parkway are classified as Minor Arterials, designed to service 25,000 to 34,000 average daily trips. Both roads have divided medians and turning lanes. These roadways were designed and constructed to support much higher traffic volumes than currently exist in this area of the city. As the DDC concept is developed, attendance projections and traffic volumes will be evaluated, as well.

While roads may accommodate the additional traffic, that doesn't mean it won't affect the neighbors or degrade their quality of life. They can study it all they want but the increase in traffic, and increase in the number of people who access the Gateway, will definitely have a negative impact on the quality of life of local residents. It is also anticipated that they will need to add a traffic light at the intersection of Thompson Peak Parkway and the Gateway entrance (also Windgate Ranch Road across the street) to accommodate the increase in traffic caused by the DDC.

How could the Desert Discovery Center impact the business community and tourism industry?

The tourism industry supported the creation of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve and being able to provide a unique Sonoran Desert immersive experience showcases Scottsdale's destination tourism brand. Visitors to these types of learning and experience venues comprise a significant segment of the travel industry. They also stay 53 percent longer and spend 35 percent more money than other kinds of tourists, thus benefitting local businesses.

It is true that the tourism industry is driving the DDC and that tourism is very important to Scottsdale. However an independent 5 year strategic plan and study, done in 2013 by Places Consulting, claimed that the DDC would not bring more tourists to Scottsdale or provide any benefit to the tourism industry, and that it would lose the city money and degrade the Preserve experience that does attract tourists, so it recommended NOT building the DDC.

How could the Desert Discovery Center benefit Scottsdale residents?

Citizens already can hike, bike and ride their horses within the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. With the addition of the DDC, they also would be able to learn more about their Sonoran desert home, while providing a one-of-a-kind experience to share with out-of-town visitors. The DDC's environmental, science and Arizona history educational programs, tied to state standards, would also be a vital resource for local teachers and school children.

This may or may not be true, however nothing stated above justifies building it in the Preserve. Everything mentioned can be accomplished by a DDC located OUTSIDE the Preserve. Also, the premier Sonoran Desert learning experience is the EXISTING Sonoran Desert Museum in Tucson and the DDC will never adequately compete with it because they have animals and interactive displays of human history in the Sonoran Desert. We also have the Desert Botanical Garden right here in the valley on the south western edge of Scottsdale. We also already have the McDowell Sonoran Conservancy steward led educational hikes and lectures conducted in the Preserve and totally compatible the Preserve and conforming to the Preserve Ordinance, so the DDC will be competing with existing learning experiences.

**For more information and to sign up for project updates, visit:
scottsdaleaz.gov (search Desert Discovery Center).**

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