

Dear Friends...

During the recent Council work study session on the Desert EDGE project, I summarized the history of events that has led to locating a Discovery Center in the preserve, at the Gateway on Thompson Peak Parkway. A few listeners asked me to share that chronology. It's a long history, so hold your seats!

In 1994 - before there was a preserve tax or a preserve! - the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission (MSPC) retained a local research firm, Nelson, Robb, Duval and DeMenna to conduct a statistically reliable telephone survey of Scottsdale registered voters to determine whether they supported land preservation.

The poll questions made it clear the City's goals were broader than just acquiring land. Each poll participant was also told, "The following are a list of features that are under study for inclusion in the preserve" and asked to rank the importance of each feature. For "Desert museums and education centers", 69.5% answered "very important" or "somewhat important," 30.5% answered "not very important" or "don't know." ***This amenity scored the lowest of all "amenities" mentioned with only 30% saying it was very important AND an equal percentage (30%) saying "not important". No other amenity had that high a "not important" percentage. Compare that to "hiking, biking, nature" at 50% saying very important and 40% somewhat important, which by your logic is 90%, or "Wildlife/Plant areas" at almost 78% saying they are very important and 18% as somewhat important for a grand total of 96%. In the conclusions, it states: "There is a definitive hierarchy of amenities preferred by voters with only two, wildlife and plant conservation areas and archaeological preserves, endorsed by majorities". Votes on other Public Access is shown below, note that "other" which is where desert museums, educational centers, visitor centers, etc. would be is only at 5%, hardly a mandate anywhere in this survey for a DDC/DE type facility.***

Also, the very same survey rated the importance of preserving the mountains and desert at 67% very important and 26% as somewhat important for a total of 93% by your logic. Only 8% said not important. Also 76% were in favor of creating the Preserve while only 7% were against it. In the summary, it states: "The most persuasive arguments for the Preserve include concerns for future generations, obligations to save the environment, loss of an important element in Scottsdale's identity, and recreational benefits. Economic arguments in favor of the Preserve appear to have less impact." So let's put it ALL in perspective, the respondents were highly in favor of preserving the land and in favor of some limited public access. This survey was to determine the public's attitude toward preserving the desert and mountains, which it did, not in trying to decide what amenities it should have which was secondary at best AND "Desert museums and education centers" came in dead last on that list.

You also didn't mention the 1998 survey which favored preservation even more, 96% of respondents highly in favor of it. Also, clearly stated in it "voters attached more importance to environmental reasons, rather than access or recreational use of the land."

In addition there was NO MENTION of any educational center, visitor center, or similar facility in the entire 1998 survey. Further, it showed not as many people were familiar with the Preserve back then as there is now. See results below.

1994 Survey Results

Question	Importance		
	Very	Somewhat	Not
Importance of Preserving Scottsdale's Mountains and Deserts	67%	26%	8%

Amenities Suggested for the Preserve	% Importance			Smith	
	Very	Somewhat	Not	Very + Somewhat	Somewhat + Not
Wildlife and native plant conservation areas	77	18	5	95	23
Archaeological and historical sites	61	26	13	87	39
Hiking, mountain biking, and nature trails	47	39	14	86	53
Areas and activities for the disabled	39	44	17	83	61
Ramadas and picnic areas	32	43	25	75	68
Desert museums and education centers	30	40	30	70	70
Equestrian trails	27	50	23	77	73

Public Access	%
Limited Access	39%
Significant public access	51%
Other alternatives	5%
Undecided	6%

1998 Survey Results

Question	Importance			Very + Somewhat
	Very	Somewhat	Not	
Desert Open Space Preservation	76%	20%	5%	96%
Knowledge about Preserve	5%	56%	39%	61%

Reasons for Preservation	Importance			Very + Somewhat
	Very	Somewhat	Not	
Access/Connections	47%	40%	13%	87%
Recreation	50%	38%	12%	88%
Scenic Views	73%	23%	4%	96%
Environmental/Wildlife	82%	13%	5%	95%
Protection from Development	87%	8%	5%	95%

Agreement with Statement	Percent
Maintain property Values	74%
Recreational Benefit	80%
Right thing to do	94%
Owe to future generations	94%
Part of Community Identity	94%
Protect against development	94%

The poll results guided City Council in structuring the May 23, 1995 Ballot Proposition 400 seeking voter approval of a 0.20% temporary and dedicated preserve sales tax. That proposition was approved almost 2 to 1. *Yes the poll clearly showed citizens wanted to preserve the*

mountains and desert, and preferred a sales tax increase, but there was no mention of amenities like a DDC. Further, the ballot language was intentionally worded so the funds collected could ONLY be used for land acquisition, none to provide any amenities. Again a clear stress on preservation of the land over recreational use which again were supported by the 1994 survey results.

Following the 1995, the MSPC began studying where preserve assets should be built to enhance public entry to and enjoyment of the preserve. By March 1999, they had published their McDowell Sonoran Preserve Access Areas Report identifying several access points. *True, however accommodating the various types of recreational users was the priority, not an educational center or other amenities, hence the use of the word “may” include such things as ramadas, picnic tables, educational centers, etc.*

There should be a single Gateway, they said, as the focal point for educational facilities as well as a broad array of public amenities - a visitor center, interpretative or educational centers, museum facilities, displays, an amphitheater, concessions and areas to accommodate large user groups. Many of those visions of 20 years ago survive today as features of the proposed Desert EDGE at the Gateway. *However many things in this access area plan, and in some earlier studies that mentioned there “may be” ramadas, picnic tables, an educational center, etc., were negated by the Preserve Ordinance, passed in 2000, that clearly prohibited uses proposed for the DDC/Desert Edge. This was intentional as those uses would morph the Preserve into a park, the last thing anyone wanted. There is absolutely NO mention of an educational center, DDC, or anything like it or any exclusion for such uses in the Preserve Ordinance, even though it was known that there “might be” an educational center put in the Preserve. Again that was intentional, ANYTHING put in the Preserve would have to follow the Preserve rules.*

About this same time, 1998, homes were being constructed on Bell Road in the McDowell Mountain Ranch community, across from the southern boundary of the proposed Gateway. *See comments at the end.*

In 2004, voters were asked to increase the preserve tax again (this time by 0.15%) and allow the revenues to be used for land "...and improvements thereto."

That vote prompted Council to begin defining potential improvements. City Council's first action was to authorize a "Municipal Use Master Site Plan" (MUMSP, for short) for the Gateway - the city equivalent of a developer's site plan. *Wrong, the first actions were to design and build some trails and trail heads to provide “appropriate public access”. The MUMSP mentioned was not readily exposed to the public and what was in it was something far smaller than what is being proposed now. The whole DDC concept took off in 2008 when 2 plans were presented, one showing one small building, like the current trail head, that would be an entry way into the Preserve where any real education would take place. Some in the preservation community were accepting of the small facility because the Preserve was still the experience, not what was inside a building. All that changed when the DDC grew in the 2nd plan presented in 2008, and grew further into what it is now. When it grew in 2008 to become a “destination attraction” all by itself, it was no longer compatible with the Preserve and every Preserve Commission to look*

at DDC plans expressed the same concerns the current one has relayed to the council, whatever is put in the Preserve must adhere to ALL the rules in the Preserve Ordinance, which the current plan does not.

In February 2006, staff held an open house to explain Council's future plans for the Gateway. Staff shared a site plan map identifying Phase I as the Gateway Access and Phase II as a Desert Discovery Center, including an interpretive center, support offices, café with outdoor dining terrace and a 400-seat outdoor amphitheater. *Correct, but what was in this plan was a much smaller facility and the café, outdoor dining, gift shop, etc. were all challenged by the Preserve Commission. We were told that those concerns will be addressed when further plans are developed. Not only were those concerns not addressed, the uses that violated the Preserve were expanded.*

On September 18, 2007, based on the 2006 public outreach, Council approved the MUMSP for the Gateway with the site plan unchanged. The accompanying Council Report described a Desert Discovery Center "...that will serve as the primary educational facility [including] a small café in conjunction with the Center...[as well as]...an outdoor amphitheater as part of the Desert Discovery Center...used in conjunction with educational and support activities for the Center." The description even anticipated "...there will be limited evening activity at the Desert Discovery Center." Mayor Mary Manross and Councilmembers Betty Drake, Wayne Ecton, Jim Lane, Bob Littlefield and Ron McCullagh all voted for the Gateway site plan. *See above. All the concerns about violating the Preserve Ordinance were to be addressed "later". Also the public still had NO idea this was being planned, and that is a very key point. Also the DDC was much smaller in this period of time.*

Starting in 2007, homes began to be constructed on the west side of Thompson Peak Parkway, across from the proposed Gateway and Desert Discovery Center.

On October 11, 2011, Council approved the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Areas Report. The 1999 Report had been updated in 2010, but still provided there would only be one Gateway and that its location would be the focal point for educational facilities and programs and include a broad array of public amenities such as a visitor center, interpretative or educational centers, museum facilities, displays, an amphitheater, concessions and areas to accommodate corporate picnics and other large user groups. The Report was adopted unanimously by Mayor Jim Lane and councilmembers Milhaven, Borowsky, Klapp, Bob Littlefield, McCullagh and Robbins. *The council approved yet another edition, but all assumed the Preserve Ordinance would be followed and this version of the DDC was not totally opposed by the MSPC.*

Before and after 2011, several versions of a Discovery Center were developed, leading to a Council decision in early 2016 to contract for a definitive study of what a Discovery Center should be. For more than twenty years, Scottsdale's elected and appointed representatives had been guided by the wishes of Scottsdale citizens; respecting this history, Council stipulated the design be sited at the already approved site north of the Gateway trailhead. *They were NEVER guided by the wishes of Scottsdale citizens as those citizens you speak of had NO idea this was going on, much less that it had grown way beyond what was approved back in 2006. The way to clear up this misconception is to put it to a public vote.*

Still, the contractor, Desert Discovery Center Scottsdale (DDCS), was given latitude to consider alternative sites. They could have recommended another site - at the Gateway, elsewhere in the preserve or out of the preserve altogether - provided an alternative showed promise as a superior location, insuring greater success for the Discovery Center. In fact, an alternative, superior site was identified, just south of the Gateway trailhead. That is the site council is now considering for the Desert EDGE. ***Totally false. The DDCSI claims the city specified the location and they could not change it, which is why they would not even consider other locations or the objections of citizens on the location. Meanwhile the council claims the DDCSI selected the location. So which is it, can't be both. We know the original site was selected by city tourism staff when they moved the DDC from Pinnacle Peak to the Preserve (Gateway) which the city didn't even own at the time, again with NO public input. But also very influential members of the DDCSI selected the site and would not allow other sites to be considered. Yes Swaback Partners did a bogus site survey to justify the Gateway, but it was loaded with errors and did not consider the downsides of the Gateway site or the positive attributes of other sites. The reality is DDCSI lobbied the council to make the Gateway the ONLY site so they could claim the city specified the site and they couldn't change it. Thus alternate sites were NEVER seriously considered.***

The other reality is that the DDCSI is after the Preserve funds to build it, so it has to be somewhere in the Preserve for them to steal that money. Voters were NEVER told any of their tax money would be used to build a "destination attraction" in the Preserve they paid for. That is the real truth you have to deal with.

You make reference to when houses were built to make it sound like only people living close to the Gateway oppose the DDC/DE but that is totally false and we have data to prove that citizens from all over the city oppose it, not just those that live near it. Scottsdale citizens are coming together on this issue, and it is in opposition to putting this facility in THEIR Preserve.

Maybe all this is your way of justifying your lack of support of a public vote, but the bottom line is that nothing you have said, even if true, justifies not allowing the public to vote on the most important decision in this city's history, that I can recall, after the formation of the Preserve and the decisions to pay for it via sales tax. You can't escape from the fact that citizens gave us the Preserve and now you are denying them a say in what is done in it. Personally I couldn't live with that.

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Comments by Howard Myers

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