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County memo shows details about proposed Canoa Hills park

By Kitty Bottemiller kbottemiller@gvnews.com Mar 27, 2018



Existing fixtures along the former golf cart path such as these weathered railroad ties are among the features being evaluated for improvements to the proposed park. This area is west of Camino del Sol.

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KITTY BOTTEMILLER | GREEN VALLEY NEWS

To the untrained eye, the former Canoa Hills golf course is slowly reverting to its desert beginnings prior to 1984, when it opened in the valleys between ridges where housing sprang up.

Decades later, an up-close examination of what's become of the property is yielding some interesting aspects factoring into a Pima County decision about whether to accept roughly 130 acres of defunct fairways and turn them into an open-space, natural park. That portion has been offered as a donation by owner Morgan North.

After months of visitations, meetings with homeowner associations, community comment and examination by key county departments, the proposed donation is moving forward for Board of Supervisors action tentatively planned in April.

If approved, what will the public be getting?

Excerpts from a county Regional Flood District memo drafted with Natural Resources, Parks and Rec, Development Services, Real Property Services, transportation and sustainability/conservation departments offer clues.

About the property

- It's in a floodplain. Roughly 77 acres, or 60 percent, of the property is subject to submersion during a 100-year flood event. A maintenance building on the property, west of Camino del Sol just north of a cluster of commercial buildings, would flood, according to hydrologic and hydraulic analysis.

Under county ownership, park maintenance would be overseen by the Regional Flood District.

- Taxes: The first half of 2017's property assessment has been paid; a pro-rated second half should be part of the title transfer, the memo states. Cumulative value of the clubhouse parcel is assessed at \$417,178 (land) and \$483,986 for improvements. The clubhouse/restaurant and maintenance building are up for sale and not of interest to the county, County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry told the Green Valley News. The only structures on the property being donated are three restrooms.

And about those: They're not feasibly salvageable and would be torn down, Huckelberry said. The utilities aren't operational and while two appear structurally sound, the third is rated poor and all would need extensive work. Although there's no current plan to replace them or provide temporary alternatives, that hasn't been ruled out. But county funds don't allow for new permanent structures anytime soon.

- Cart paths: 80 percent are concrete and in good shape; the remainder are asphalt and not so good. Where paths cut into hillsides, retaining walls need attention.
- Also needed: Removal of debris blocking storm runoff, to prevent further erosion. Pedestrian bridges are recommended for the two areas where the cart path crosses a regulatory watercourse. Handrails may be required where slopes and drop-offs present hazards.
- Ponds: They're in poor shape. Relative equipment has been removed, the spillways washed out, banks deteriorated and the irrigation infrastructure, cannibalized or damaged beyond repair.

With no outlets, they retain storm water, which attracts mosquitoes and poses drowning hazards. County staff recommends they be filled with earthen material to reduce pond depth. Once modified, they could serve as water-harvesting basins for restoration.

- Also called for: Restoration of erosion control in the two wider drainage ways of the course's four main watersheds which flow along fairways, due to expected higher velocity. The flood district is awaiting structural inspection reports from the transportation department for specifics on culverts serving as drainage and cart access. The narrower drainage ways aren't subject to flooding, so would allow for improvements such as benches, picnic areas and other potential future amenities.
- What's growing, or was: Staff observed signs of 75 shrub, tree, herb and a few succulent species on the property. Most are perennials, and fewer than 20, non-native. Plant life includes large areas of native, annual grasses and amaranth, an excellent wildlife forage but is fast-growing one producing pollen which causes hay fever, allergic reactions and skin irritation from leaves. It would need to be reduced, as other native plants can't thrive in its proximity. Patches of bermuda grass need to be mapped and removed.

The addition of container plants and a seed mix developed for restoration of nearby historic Canoa Ranch may increase species abundance at Canoa Hills; a soil fertility test is recommended before restoration is undertaken.

- Animal life: The area's biodiversity isn't expected to change much. Species movement is already limited by tailings from Freeport-McMoRan's Sierrita Mine, which interrupts landscape connectivity with undeveloped desert, the Sierrita Mountains and Tinaja Hills west of Green

Valley, and will into the foreseeable future, according to the analysis. Homes surrounding the park likely also restrict some species.

The property is already inhabited by deer, coyotes, javelinas, bobcats, raptors, songbirds and reptiles. Studies of culverts similar to the course's 84-inch corrugated metal variety and 10-foot concrete box types show that some wildlife adapt to such channels to cross highways.

The one prominent fatal flaw relates to the disjointed nature of the culverts at the median, so animals may wander onto the highway, causing a traffic hazard, the memo states.

Depending on the extent of native plants and animal support, "restoration is likely to have an overall, positive contribution to biological connectivity," the analysis states.

- Views: As riparian restoration occurs, distance views will likely diminish, however, visual benefits would increase for pedestrians using park paths.
- Maintenance and funding: If the county park plan is approved, short-term recommendations include cart path improvements (erosion repairs, sediment removal, trimming of trees and other vegetation, and adding handrails where needed), maintenance plan development, filling the ponds and depressions.

While no estimate has been provided yet for initial improvements, maintenance is projected at \$50,000 to \$100,000 yearly, Huckelberry said.

"We could contract with Green Valley Recreation but no decisions have been made yet."

Longterm recommendations include re-establishing natural drainage patterns, reshaping them for a more natural flow, and addressing invasive weeds.

- Eventual amenities: Possibilities mentioned for consideration include adding foot paths, ramadas, picnic areas and benches, birding, more environmental restoration, conservation easements and Pickleball courts. The courts may be unlikely, pending outcome of current GVR plans to locate a Pickleball complex near Canoa Preserve Park off Camino de la Canoa.

Any adaptive re-use plans are to be developed with input from adjacent HOAs, GVR, Green Valley Council and other stakeholders. Such improvements would come at the request and expense of private entities such as HOAs, GVR and others, with the county leasing land to

those entities.

Discussion regarding several letters of concern from adjacent HOAs about the proposed park are ongoing through meetings with property owners, HOAs and others, and a response to this question by Huckelberry will be provided at a later date, the memo states.

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Did you know?

- Canoa Hills Golf Course opened in 1984, in the smoothed-out valleys between ridges where several housing subdivisions developed. The course was costly to build and maintain, which eventually led to its closure in July 2013.
- It is one of 10 courses to close statewide, and one of two in Pima County, the other being the Santa Rita course in Corona de Tucson established in 1976. In that case, the county declined to take possession to turn it into a park, and over time, individuals bought its former greens and fairways and built homes there.
- While suitable for an open-space park, the Canoa Hills property poses design challenges limited by existing rural homestead zoning, topography, floodplains, public access, distance between subdivisions and compatible uses with nearby residents.
- If the county declines the property donation and the course remains privately owned, current zoning allows a combination of general business (three acres, including the existing clubhouse building which is up for sale), and most of the rest rural homestead, which requires at least 130,000 square feet (4.13 acres) of lot size per dwelling unit – enough room for roughly 31 residences. The 16th hole is an exception, where common area/open space within Canoa Estates was transferred to the course owner but with the open-space restriction remaining.