

Requestor: Pima County and Conservation Acquisition Commission

Date: 8.5.14

Future Pima County Bond Election Proposed Project

Project Name: Open Space Acquisition Program

Location: Numerous eligible properties throughout eastern Pima County & Ajo, Arizona, as shown on map titled Land Conservation Priorities for 2015 Pima County Bond Election.

Scope: Continue past voter-approved efforts to expand a network of national, state and regional parks and natural areas for the benefit of the community and wildlife. Bond funding would be combined with other available funds to purchase as many eligible properties as possible from willing sellers. Many of these eligible properties were identified as the result of a science-based regional planning process shaped by extensive public debate. Known as the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan (SDCP), this plan has been guiding regional efforts since 2001 to conserve important natural areas, while facilitating continued growth and development.

The network of national, state and regional parks and protected natural areas in Pima County has grown dramatically over the past decade. As a result of the 2004 voter-approved bond measure, Pima County was able to purchase 53 properties, totaling 47,000 acres and 192 miles of rivers and washes, as well as almost 130,000 acres of State grazing leases now managed for conservation as part of working ranches. This equates to 20 percent of the lands identified in the 2004 bond ordinance as priorities for conservation. It is estimated that \$120 million in bond funding could conserve approximately 23 percent of the remaining land conservation priorities. Achieving a world-class network of parks and natural areas is an incremental process.

Bond funding would support the purchase of properties in two categories: (1) Habitat Protection Priorities and Associated Wildlife Corridors and (2) Community Open Space Priorities. Both of these categories include privately-owned properties and State Trust lands.

(1) The Habitat Protection Priorities were developed in 2003 in order to identify the most biologically important lands to protect first to implement the SDCP and more specifically, Pima County's Multi-Species Conservation Plan. The Habitat Protection Priorities were updated between 2006 and 2010 to reflect information not available in 2003. Eligible properties identified as Habitat Protection Priorities include a wide range of important natural areas critical to the survival of numerous vulnerable plants and animals in Pima County. These eligible properties range from large working ranches containing high quality grasslands, to small properties along important rivers and washes. These eligible properties are located between Interstate 10 and Tortolita Mountain Park, along the Brawley Wash and Santa Cruz River west of the Tucson Mountains, east and west of Green Valley, west of Madera Canyon, north and south of Vail, along the northeastern slopes of the Catalina Mountains, and along the San Pedro River. Associated wildlife corridors were added in 2007 and include lands linking existing and future national, state and regional parks and natural areas.

(2) The Community Open Space Priorities were developed in 2003 and updated between 2003 and 2011. Many of the properties were proposed for conservation by community groups, conservation organizations, neighborhood associations, and the general public due to their special importance to the community and their accessibility to residents living in or visiting the greater Tucson area. Eligible properties in this category include lands near Saguaro National Park East and West, Tucson Mountain Park, Green Valley, the Santa Rita Mountains, Colossal Cave Mountain Park, the Catalina Highway, Sabino Canyon, and Catalina State Park.

Not more than 25 percent of the bond funding will be allocated to Community Open Space Priorities, and not less than 75 percent will be allocated to Habitat Protection Priorities.

NOTE: NOT ALL ELIGIBLE PROPERTIES WILL BE ACQUIRED: The value of the properties identified is in excess of the bond funding allocation. This allows flexibility since the County only purchases property from willing sellers and some lands will be developed. The County will continue past efforts to incrementally conserve these important natural areas as funding is available. Eligible State Trust land can only be purchased through the standard State Trust land acquisition process requiring a public auction. State Trust land can also be managed for conservation without purchase. During the 2004 bond program, the County acquired State grazing leases at little or no cost as a result of purchasing the associated private ranch land, and those leases are managed by the County for conservation.

Benefits: Acquiring these properties will expand national, state and local parks and natural areas for benefit of the community and wildlife, increasing opportunities for outdoor recreation, protecting important rivers and washes, conserving local water supplies, reducing flooding, maintaining scenic views, protecting historic and culturally important places, and preserving working farms and ranches. Pima County is applying for a permit under the federal Endangered Species Act, whereby conserving these natural areas will provide more certainty, and mitigation lands, for public and private development projects to continue in areas suitable for development. Conserving important natural lands in rural areas of the County prevents the unnecessary expansion of roads and other public facilities, as well as the associated increased costs of public services to taxpayers. National, state and regional parks are also an integral part of our local economy. One of our most important industries is tourism. The National Park Service reports that in 2013 visitors to both districts of Saguaro National Park spent \$41 million locally. Arizona State Parks reports that in 2007, visitors to Catalina State Park spent \$12.9 million locally. In 2001 the Arizona Game and Fish Department estimated that the economic impact associated with wildlife viewing in Pima County totaled \$326 million. More generally, in a visitor survey conducted by Visit Tucson, it was found that the surrounding natural environment and outdoor/desert activities were cited by visitors as Tucson's greatest attractions.

Costs: \$120 million

Bond Funding: \$120 million

Other Funding: Federal and State Grants, Star Pass Environmental Enhancement Fund, Flood Control District Tax Levy, and development related mitigation funding

Fiscal Year Project Start and Finish Date: Entire length of bond program

Project Management Jurisdiction: Pima County

Future Operating and Maintenance Costs: Based on the average cost to operate and maintain the existing natural open space parks system of Pima County, it is anticipated that future operations and maintenance will cost approximately \$7 per year per acre of added natural open space.

Regional Benefits: The eligible properties are located throughout eastern Pima County, including areas within cities and towns, as well as in Ajo, Arizona

Supervisor District of Project Location: ALL