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Green Valley residents aim to keep open space

2,000-acre parcel about to join wish list of preserves

By **Tony Davis**

ARIZONA DAILY STAR

GREEN VALLEY — As Sonoran Desert parcels go, this is not one of the lushest.

It has only one saguaro — albeit a rare crested one — and is not nearly as crammed with lesser-sized cacti such as barrel, cholla and prickly pear as is the desert surrounding the Tucson Mountains, for instance. But for Bill Adamson and thousands of other Green Valley residents, this is the only decent-sized, undeveloped desert in their backyards — the best they've got.

Now, this proposed, 2,000-acre Green Valley Desert West Preserve is about to join a 584,000-acre wish list of open-space preserves across the county. On Thursday, the Pima County Conservation Acquisition Commission will make a final recommendation on a proposed open-space bond package costing about \$285 million. The open-space bonds would be part of a larger county bond package — of still-unknown scale — that could go on the ballot as soon as November 2008.

The proposal includes a host of open-space parcels that didn't go before the voters in 2004, when voters passed the last county open-space bond, with a price tag of \$174 million. They include dozens of ironwood forest parcels on the Northwest Side, thousands of acres of springs and riverfront riparian areas, six wildlife corridors and 25,000 acres of state-owned grazing leased land adjoining county-owned ranchlands.

The final amount that would go before voters probably won't be known until next spring. That's because a County Bond Advisory Committee and the County Board of Supervisors must first sift through at least a billion dollars' worth of proposed projects of many types before setting a final total. It's possible that the open-space program would be scaled back before going on the ballot. That would be just as in 2004, when an original \$250 million bond was ultimately sliced.

Larger proposal sought

Conservation acquisition commission members were hoping to see a larger open-space proposal now than in 2004 because they expect a lot of state-owned land in the bond package to become available for purchase in coming years, said Bill Roe, the commission chairman.

The Green Valley preserve area is state-owned and like others, it must be sold under the Arizona Constitution for the maximum dollar value to raise

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Carolyn Campbell, vice chair of the County Bond Advisory Committee and director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection

Some proposed additions since 2004

Large open spaces added to proposed 2008 bond since the 2004 bond passed:

- County grazing leases on state lands connected to three county-owned ranches: 25,000 acres.
- Six wildlife corridors: 12,000 acres.
- Springs and streams in and near Arivaca, Cienega and Rincon creeks: 10,927 acres.
- Two northern Altar Valley ranches: 3,500 acres.
- More than 3,800 acres of state land and 1,360 acres of private land in the Northwest Side's ironwood forest habitat.
- Green Valley Desert West Preserve: 2,000 acres.
- Bellota Preservation Corp.

money for public schools. That often means selling the land to developers to build new subdivisions.

It might be years before the state land goes on the market, Roe said. "But we have to be ready for when the State Land Department auctions off stuff, or we will be caught in a position of having no way to respond."

But County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry said he believes the \$285 million figure for open space is too high based on the competing proposals. The decision will not be his, but his recommendations are usually crucial to the Board of Supervisors. If you put together what the various advisory subcommittees have or will recommend for bond proposals, the county probably doesn't have the capacity to finance them all, Huckelberry said.

Because of the current real estate slump and economic uncertainty, county staff members and Bond Advisory Committee members are uncertain whether they'll recommend one large bond package for next year, like the \$582 million voters approved in 2004. Or, the county could put a series of smaller bond packages before voters over several years. Smaller packages would dampen the immediate hit on property tax bills at a time when some property owners are financially stressed, officials said.

"There are so many things in flux right now," said Larry Hecker, an attorney who chairs the bond advisory committee. "If we go with a recommendation for a bond program next year, we want it to be a reasonable one, one that is prudent from a taxpayer standpoint."

Support is substantial

As the various bond proposals move forward, the advisory committee and the supervisors can expect to hear plenty from Adamson and others in Green Valley supporting the Desert West Preserve plan. The committee has lined up support from 45 Green Valley homeowners associations, representing 52 percent of more than 7,800 total homes there, Adamson said. Green Valley's hiking and recreation clubs, with more than 20,000 total members, also support it, said Adamson, who himself hikes the area once or twice a week.

As you hike through the area, red tile roofs pop into view from the east, and green, brown and white layers comprising the tailings piles at Phelps Dodge's copper mine dominate the landscape to the west.

In between is a rare, unspoiled patch of desert. Local residents surveyed half the 2,000 acres and found more than 100 Pima pineapple cacti, listed as endangered by the federal government.

"It would be the first open-space park in Green Valley," Adamson said. "Green Valley doesn't have any public open-space parks, just a few pocket parks and a lot of private recreation facilities. Between Green Valley and Sahuarita, it can benefit a large population — there are over 40,000 people."

This area is at a higher risk of being developed than many other state land parcels because it's so close to existing development, said Nicole Fyffe, Huckelberry's executive assistant. From a real estate standpoint, the mine tailings are a negative, but 2,000 acres is enough to hold some homes and still have a buffer against the tailings.

Some wanted more money

In fashioning the open-space package, conservation acquisition commission

property in the San Pedro Valley: 2,000 acres.

- Expansions to Saguaro National Park-East and West: About 600 acres.

Source: Pima County Administrator's Office

Did you know ...

A giant saguaro with crests atop three of six arms spells rarity.

Standing less than a half-hour by foot from Green Valley's western edge, the 25-foot-tall saguaro is one of the few known in Arizona having crests atop multiple arms pointing in several directions, experts say.

Typically, the crest grows at the saguaro's top, often with the arms spreading outward, far more symmetrically than those of the Green Valley cactus. It stands on state-owned land in the heart of the proposed 2,000-acre Green Valley West Desert Preserve.

"They usually only crest in one place. That one crests on three or four different arms — they're like rabbits, with bunny ears," said Bob Cardell, a founder of the Crested Saguaro Society, a Tucson group that has photographed this and 836 other crested saguaros across the state.

This cactus is one of a kind of those crested, or cristate, saguaros that he has seen, Cardell said. Pat Hammes, another society founder, said that one saguaro in the Tortolita Mountain foothills has crests jutting from three arms, although those arms all point straight up. Also unusual about the Green Valley specimen: It is the only saguaro in sight there, whereas most crested saguaros grow amid more traditional saguaros.

Crested saguaros have long baffled scientists who don't know

member Roe said some members, including him, wanted more money, perhaps \$500 million. Others wanted less, including Carolyn Campbell, vice chair of the overall bond committee and director of the Coalition for Sonoran Desert Protection, who argued that there is no way to get \$500 million, Roe said.

"No matter what you put in it, it is not going to come close to fulfilling the vision of what needs to be done," Roe said. "If you are trimmed down, we will lose some opportunities, inevitably."

Campbell said she hopes open space will get the full \$285 million, although she acknowledged that it may be less because of financial uncertainties.

"I think everybody understands how important funding open space is, helping us to define our future," she said. "Buying it now rather than later is a bigger bang for the buck."

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Some scientists who don't know why some saguaros crest while most others don't. Crests are found in a fraction of the few million saguaros estimated to exist in Arizona, said Mark Dimmitt, an Arizona-Sonora Desert Museum scientist who is the museum's natural history director.

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various panels' bond proposals

Pima County bond proposals from various advisory committees (in millions):

\$357

parks

\$285

open space

\$140

public works

\$60

justice and law enforcement

\$50

transportation safety

\$38

cultural resources

\$37.6

affordable housing

\$31.75

neighborhood reinvestment

Total: About \$999.35 million, with proposals to come for public facilities such as libraries and community centers, and for cultural resources parcels inside the city of Tucson.

Source: Pima County Administrator's Office

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