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Stage set for ballot battle on state land

Voters to decide: conservation or development

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PHOENIX — Backers of an initiative to set aside up to 690,000 acres of state land for preservation filed their petitions Friday, setting the stage for a pitched battle on the November ballot with an alternative pushed by legislators, home builders and ranchers.

Dave Howell, chairman of the board of The Nature Conservancy, said the proposal, if approved by voters, will update the nearly century-old system of managing the 9.3 million acres left of land given to Arizona by the federal government when it became a state in 1912.

"The realities of Arizona of both the private-sector development side and the conservation pressures ... on our land and water and habitats is very different than it was when this was all done at statehood," he said.

Howell said the initiative would not only earmark certain lands for conservation but also would revamp the process the State Land Department uses to sell off parcels sought by developers.

Spencer Kamps, lobbyist for the Home Builders Association of Central Arizona, said he agrees that certain unique areas of the state should be placed off limits to development.

But Kamps said the mission of the Land Department is to manage the property for maximum benefit of the trust, whose proceeds are earmarked for education. He said the initiative changes the whole focus to conservation, with procedures that could place state lands off limits for the homes needed as people arrive in the state.

"You shouldn't freeze and tie up land," Kamps said.

While the coalition of groups pushing the initiative includes several conservation organizations, a major player has refused to back it.

Don Steuter, conservation chairman of the Sierra Club, said neither the initiative nor the legislative plan sets aside enough for preservation.

The initiative guarantees only 300,000 acres would remain open; the balance depends on cities or conservation groups coming up with the money to buy it at appraised value.

The legislative plan clarifies that 40,000 acres of urban land already earmarked for conservation could be sold to communities, directing the Legislature to set up procedures to preserve another 400,000 acres in rural areas.

Steuter said the initiative is designed to actually encourage selling off more state land to generate funds for the trust, even to the point of letting the Land Department enter into joint ventures with developers.

Penny Kotterman, a former president of the Arizona Education Association, conceded that one key goal is getting more money for education. That is why the measure not only sets aside lands for preservation but also sets up procedures for planning other parcels for sell-off and development.

Note: an interactive map showing the places that could be set aside for preservation under the initiative is available at: www.aztrustlands.com/maps/places.htm

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