

News

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Environmentalists, Avra residents grapple over plan to close roads

By Carmen Ramos Chandler
The Arizona Daily Star

Members of an environmental group clashed with Avra Valley residents over the National Park Service's recommendation to close nearly 10 miles of roads linking Avra Valley to Tucson.

About 100 people, nearly 60 of them Avra Valley residents, attended a public hearing last night on a \$7.7 million park service plan for the Saguaro National Monument over the next 10 to 15 years.

Several Avra Valley residents said that if the roads were closed it would cost them time, money, property values and might endanger their lives.

But Arizona Earth First! members supported the plan to close roads inside the monument's west unit, which includes 2.5 miles of Golden Gate Road, 2.75 miles of Picture Rocks Road and 4.5 miles of Sandario Road.

Under the recommendation, the roads would be obliterated or turned into trails.

The roads would not be closed until Pima County provided adequate alternative routes.

Jack Edgerton, chairman of the Picture Rocks Fire District, which serves Avra Valley, said that closing of the roads "would result in life threatening delays to our base hospital."

He said if the roads were closed, regardless of the alternative routes, it would be an additional half hour for emergency vehicles.

"And a half hour when it's already a half hour (to get to a hospital) could mean the difference between life and death," he said.

However, John Patterson of Earth First! said he supported the road closures and said the park service's recommendation did not go far enough.

He said he would like to see the monument declared a national park and human access to the park limited.

Several Earth First! members also voiced their support for the park service's recommendation.

While they spoke, several Avra Valley residents scoffed and grumbled.

Robert Conlin, a member of the Avra Valley Action

Committee, presented the park service representatives with about 1,600 signatures on petitions supporting Supervisor Ed Moore's proposal to turn the monument over to Pima County.

"You say you're in the business of safeguarding resources," he told the representatives, "the resources we're interested in saving are our children."

"We will not suffer the loss of those roads, and we will fight you with every means possible," Conlin said.

Many people in the audience applauded.

Pam Hendrickson, another Avra Valley resident, said she helped circulate the petitions, but now she questions Moore's proposal.

"How can we trust Pima County to take care of the monument when it agrees to trade the Tucson Mountain Park," she said. "How can we be sure they won't do that to the monument some day?"

Earlier this year the county asked the federal government to buy the Cienega and Empire ranches and then exchange the ranches for Tucson Mountain Park, which is near the Saguaro National Monument west.

She said she opposes the closure of the roads, adding that the park service's recommendation relies on a county regional transportation plan that was rejected by voters last year when they voted down a half-cent sales tax.

"We (Avra Valley residents) weren't even consulted about the transportation plan," she said.

Representatives for Sens. Dennis DeConcini, D-Ariz., and John McCain, R-Ariz., and Pima County Supervisor Iris Dewhirst, read statements supporting the park service's recommendation.

However, Moore said he did not support the recommendation.

He said the park service was disregarding an inter-governmental agreement signed with the county in 1982.

The agreement says that if the park service proposed to close Picture Rocks Road, "it shall record a deed in the favor of Pima County for the original rights-of-way without objection."

Another public hearing will be held at 6 tonight in the Apache Room at the Tucson Community Center.

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SAGUARO NATIONAL
MONUMENT

son, Wednesday, September 16, 1987

The Arizona Daily Star

Avra residents assail monument road plan as 'no alternative'

San Huff
Arizona Daily Star

Twenty-five Avra Valley residents of a total of 60 at a meeting spoke for peace last night in their continuing battle against a National Park Service proposal to close three miles in their area.

The closures, part of a proposed million upgrading of the Saguaro National Monument — both East and West — over the next 10 to 20 years, would affect 2.5 miles of Picacho Gate Road; 2.75 miles of Picacho Rocks Road; and 4.5 miles of

Sandario Road — all in the monument's Tucson Mountain unit. The roads would be either obliterated or converted to hiking and equestrian trails.

Residents complained that closing the roads would lengthen emergency medical response time, lower property values and deny them easy access to the monument they love.

The proposal would close the roads only if Pima County builds several arterial roads in the area, as recommended in the county's 1986 Regional Transportation Plan, recently rejected by voters.

Bob Conlin, leader of the Avra Valley Action Committee, told park service officials that the county transportation plan was not designed for Avra Valley residents.

Conlin said it was designed instead to relieve Tucson traffic congestion.

"Your alternative routes are no alternative at all," he said. "To us, it's an alternative for an 18-wheel driver going from L.A. to El Paso who wants to avoid Tucson traffic."

Regarding the proposed closing of Picture Rocks Road, Pam Hendrickson of Avra Valley cited a 1982 agreement between Pima County

and the park service. The agreement said that the park service should offer the road to the county if it decided to propose to close the road, she said.

Hendrickson said Deputy County Attorney David Dingeldine, chief of the civil division, told her that the county must be given the option to take over the road in such a case.

When another resident suggested the park service's actions had already triggered the terms of the agreement with the county, monument director Bill Paleck noted the closures are mentioned in three of

four alternative plans within the service's general management plan, and that no actual proposal has been made.

He also tried to quell residents' fears that they could lose access to their property.

"It's not our intent to land-lock anybody," Paleck said.

Avra Valley resident Gary Gerew noted that new roads suggested by the proposed plan adjoin property owned by major developers, and would benefit them. He noted developers blade off large tracts of desert in order to build.

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Margaret Nellis, who owns property bordering the monument, said laughter from the crowd as she read the park service's description of riparian forest in the area as being composed of 13 varieties of trees.

She also took issue with the park service report, which stated that under heavy traffic conditions, dust on Golden Gate road would coat station and reduce visibility.

"That's probably the least-travelled road in the county," she said. "If you want solitude, take Golden Road."

Instead of closing resource, widen roads into mountains

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I've spent a fair amount of time over the years hiking around the Tucson Mountains.

I also spend quite a few hours in a year's time commuting from one part of the mountain range to another. I thoroughly enjoy these scenic drives.

In recent years, I've ridden my bicycle many times on Picture Rocks, Gates Pass, Kinney and Sandario roads. And, occasionally, I'll run some of the back roads.

I take pictures of the vegetation, wildlife and anything else that strikes my fancy. I glass the countryside for big game animals and for birds. I look at the rocks. I have picnics with my family. I hike the washes, the ridges and the trails.

The Tucson Mountains is a great place to look at and/or to be a part of the outdoors.

But the recently published environmental assessment for a new general management plan for the northern half of the mountain range would drastically change my looking at and my being a part of the area. This assessment was prepared by personnel of the National Park Service, which operates the Tucson Mountain Unit of Saguaro National Monument.

If the recommendations made in the assessment are implemented, my commuting and scenic driving would be dramatically reduced. Ditto for my bike riding. Nor would I be doing nearly as much running and hiking in the northern end of the range.

The NPS is on a wilderness kick. That's the last thing the half million people living in the Tucson metropolitan area need is more wilderness in the Tucson Mountains. What we need is more and better vehicular access to and through the northern part of the range.

Specifically, let's take Picture Rocks Road. This is as pretty a scenic drive as there is in the Tucson area. It allows commuters and visitors to enjoy three-plus miles of magnificent desert landscape without the intrusion of man-made improvements like mobile homes and corrals, power poles and windmills, horses and kids.

The NPS wants to close Picture Rocks Road in the monument. Why? Because it would improve visitor safety and appreciation of park resources.

Ridiculous.

I guess the NPS figures if there is no Picture Rocks Road on which to drive, then the safety of the non-drivers will be enhanced. If the road is closed, I will no longer be able to appreciate the resources of that part of the monument as a commuter, as a visitor and as a biker. And my ability to appreciate the resources as a hiker will be greatly reduced because I can't drive to where I want to start hiking.

The NPS wants to close about 10 miles of roads in



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the monument. "... conversion of the closed portion of these roads to trails would greatly increase opportunities to explore and appreciate the monument's resources on foot or horseback."

Nonsense. Such closures will greatly reduce my opportunities to explore and appreciate the monument's resources. Most of my hikes are of a short duration — less than eight hours. Now, it's fairly easy for me to get to any part of the monument I want and get back out in eight hours. Not so if the roads are closed. I will have to hike farther, and it will take longer to get where I want to go. And I won't be able to spend as much time at my destination.

If the NPS has its way, there will be only one road into and out of the monument. That will be by way of the Red Hills Visitor Center. No more vehicular access by way of Picture Rocks Road, Sandario Road or Mile Wide Road.

You can bet next month's salary that this one road into the monument will be locked, say from 5 p.m. to 8 a.m.

The NPS figures nobody has any legitimate business in the monument after dark. No more moonlight hikes. No more evening cookouts. No more star watching. No more midnight snacks. No more owl prowls. No more sunrise breakfasts.

The NPS believes the best way to protect the resource is to keep the people out. Close the roads and make it a wilderness.

Instead of closing Picture Rocks Road, the NPS ought to widen it and put in bike paths. The same for Sandario and Mile Wide roads.

Tucsonans don't go to the Tucson Mountains to get a wilderness experience. They go to the mountains to have fun for a couple of hours or a half day. Some hardcore hikers — I guess that's me — might spend most of a day.

Despite what Congress declared 11 years ago, the north half of the Tucson Mountains is not a wilderness area. It's a recreation area because that's the way Tucsonans use it.

So the NPS ought to toss the pro-wilderness plan in the ash can and come up with one that will give Tucsonans more of what they want to do in the Tucson Mountains. They want to enjoy the scenery and they like scenic drives.

Don't close the roads. Make them better.

Pete Cowgill is an outdoor writer for the Star. His work appears in Friday's and Sunday's editions.