Comment
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A deal is a deal

Score one for the saguaros.

On Tuesday, the Pima County Board of Supervisors turned aside the request of a developer and the recommendations of its own staff and the county Planning and Zoning Commission, in favor of preserving a stand of saguaros on some foothills land along Skyline Drive near La Paloma.

The board also instructed its staff to develop new, tougher guidelines to follow in future rezonings that affect the area's signature native plant.

The developer, Pegasus Development of San Mateo, Calif., had sought to change the conditions under which it could build 360 luxury apartments on the site, near the intersection of Skyline and Hacienda del Sol.

Specifically, it wanted to be exempted from the requirement, enacted when the land was rezoned in 1983, that it save 80 percent of the saguaros on the site.

The developer argued that many of the saguaros were too old and too sickly to survive transplantation. It wanted permission to bulldoze them and replace them, at a 2-to-1 ratio, with younger plants. If it could not do so, it argued, it could not possibly develop the parcel to its rezoned potential.

To which the board, unanimously, said, "Too bad."

It listened instead to the arguments of nearby residents. "A deal is a deal," they said. The requirement for preserving 80 percent of the saguaros was not only a condition of rezoning, it had been written into the covenants governing the use of the land.

"If you can't save those old guys, then leave them alone," argued resident Scott Alexander, who said the out-of-town developer might have had a better understanding of the controversy if the plants in question had been sequoias.

Nobody would argue that a couple of sequoia saplings would be ample replacement for one of the giant redwoods, said Alexander.

In turning down Pegasus' request, the supervisors also ordered a new look at laws governing native plants. Arizona law protects the saguaros on public land, but private landowners can bulldoze or transplant the cacti by following a simple permit process. Some corporate landowners have transplanted mature saguaros to golf links in Palm Springs, Calif., and developments elsewhere, despite a growing consensus among plant experts that transplantation of large saguaros is seldom successful, even though the giants appear to thrive for five years or so.

It is incumbent on the Board of Supervisors in this county, where saguaros are most plentiful and where a county park and two units of a national park are dedicated to their preservation, to make sure that its laws and rezoning requirements are as protective as possible of the giant cacti.