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Talk of the Town: Granite Dells: A threatened community resource

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Citizen alert: Your voices need to be heard as the Arizona Eco Development proposal for annexation and development comes before the city for public comment and council action. This is the time to understand the issues and to speak up for our wonderful Granite Dells.

For years, the Granite Dells in Prescott was a mecca for visitors to the famous Granite Dells Resort and nearby sites. Later the rails-to-trails projects resulted in the Peavine and Iron King Trails.

Hiking, cycling, boating, and birding have created a recreation and economic boom in the Dells and the lakes, serving thousands of locals and outside visitors.

Fact: Prescott's reputation is highly dependent on its fortunate conjunction of geography, culture (including history and prehistory), and livability. Prescott is blessed with a diverse and beautiful landscape, remnants of the "Old West," a dynamic downtown, abundant recreational opportunities, and a wonderful climate. These are all economic factors, as well.

Parks and Recreation is very aware that a park in Granite Dells would be of enormous economic and cultural benefit to the city. Open space access (trails) is one of the most productive sources of revenue at the least cost; trail usage in Prescott exceeded 800,000 visits last year.

Fact: Arizona Eco Development (AED) owns 15,000 acres of land adjacent to the city and plans to develop it. Though much of their land is open grassland, a spectacular portion of the Granite Dells, including the junction of the Peavine and Iron King Trails and the scenic Point of Rocks, is a tiny part of the planned development. As currently envisioned, the AED proposal for roads and buildings would compromise the natural values, views, and wildlife habitat that the Prescott General and Open Space Master Plans prioritize.

We need AED to recognize that their portion of the Granite Dells is an essential component of a regional park, a valuable amenity for their residents and the greater community. We need them to honor their stated intentions to be sensitive to local needs and concerns of citizens.

As the city and the developer negotiate terms of annexation, both planning and zoning and the city council will host public hearings. We citizens can and should affect the outcome through informed activism, supporting a compromise resulting in the protection of the significant values of Granite Dells and its recreation trails.

The invitation is here: We need to express our desire for significant open space (a regional park) along the Peavine and Iron King Trails, ensuring protection of the ecological, hydrological, archeological, historical, recreational, and aesthetic values of the Granite Dells that both the City and AED proclaim.

If we do, the fortunate conjunction of geography, culture, livability, and economic strength will be our gift to the future, but if we fail, Prescott will join the long list of mediocre cities unable or unwilling to follow their own published visions.

Walt Anderson is a local naturalist and long-time Granite Dells preservation advocate.