

Talk of the Town: Our line in the sand (Save the Dells)

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From our inception, Save the Dells has worked to secure a fair deal in which Arizona Eco Development (AED) protects approximately 500 beloved acres in the Granite Dells as public open space in exchange for the tremendously valuable benefits of annexation.

Prescott's Land Development Code requires developers to dedicate 25% of their land as open space. At a minimum, AED is required to protect at least 620 acres of their 2,500-acre development. Our position is that 500 of the 620 acres should be where the public wants it – in the Dells.

By Jason Gisi's own accounting, AED stands to make \$200 million on the proposed development if they build in the county, or a whopping \$400 million if they are annexed into city limits.

It's clear to me that annexation is in AED's advantage. However, Gisi says they won't protect the land in the Dells in exchange for the enormous benefits of annexation alone, even though they paid just \$1 million for the 500 acres.

So, to save the Dells, the City of Prescott offered AED 648 acre-feet of water. This would provide enough water for the annexation as well as for two county parcels and some commercial parcels near Granite Dells parkway that AED annexed a few years ago. That amount of water has a market value of more than \$20 million.

Protecting the 500 acres would require that AED relocate 400 homes and the 200-room resort. The city's offer would allow AED to transfer all of that to the north, plus some, to sweeten the deal.

We find the city's current offer to AED acceptable and sufficiently in line with our two years of advocacy. If this water doesn't go to AED, it will go to another developer. And AED will develop its county parcels one way or another.

But the city's offer isn't good enough for AED. It is demanding 1,082 acre-feet of water to protect the Dells. That's enough water to serve 6,500 homes — an astonishing increase over their original proposal of 2,685 homes.

It's simple: AED says that for them to offer the 500 acres in the Dells as public open space, it wants the city to give enough water to serve almost 4,000 additional houses above and beyond the original proposal.

This counteroffer goes way too far.

Our original position, which has been on our website for almost two years, states that we wouldn't oppose delivering city-owned water to AED for its proposed annexations, or to additional AED lands, as long as the priority 500 acres were protected as public open space.

The "Water for Land" deal that's taking shape right now reflects this vision. But I'll admit it's an uneasy situation that sets a potentially dangerous precedent of delivering water to land outside city limits. To avert any unintended consequences, and to protect the integrity of the negotiations, we've made it clear to the city that we don't support any deal with AED that hinges on an overhaul of the water policy to provide water to unincorporated county lands at large.

Significant changes to the city water policy are separate issues, to be resolved at a later date, and should not be a part of the city's deal with AED.

With the help of the city's water, AED said it could make at least \$400 million in profits with annexation. Yet, AED argues that those profits, which would be a direct result of annexation, should not be factored into the accounting for this grand bargain. They must be.

A deal including 1,082 acre-feet of water would lean too strongly in favor of AED's profits. Plus, that amount of water is more than AED can even account for in the revised plans it has offered. So far, they haven't been able to explain the discrepancy.

Let's all remember that annexation into Prescott is a privilege, not a right. Annexations should be good for both the developer and the public. Here's the bottom line: AED shouldn't take home astronomical profits from the exploitation of publicly owned water without doing what's right for the people and wildlife of Prescott. That's our line in the sand.

Amber Fields, a third-generation native of Prescott, is a Whiskey Row business owner and chair of Save the Dells.