

Talk of the Town: Dells Regional Park and Preserve: it's time for answers

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Over the past few months, I've seen more people on the trails than ever. A [May 7 article](#) in the Courier reported that use of city trails has doubled as people have ventured out for socially distant exercise. Prescott's residents and visitors alike have realized the value of open space as many events were canceled due to COVID-19.

Aside from the benefits of enjoyment and exercise, open space has real economic value too. The recently released University of Arizona "[Economic Value of Trails in Arizona](#)" report concluded that Arizona's non-motorized trails contribute \$8.3 billion to our economy, and proximity to trails helps people decide where to live or visit. The Audubon Society's recent report titled "[The Economic Impact of Arizona's Rivers, Lakes, and Streams](#)" found that water-based recreation in Yavapai County supports 9,000 jobs and creates \$1.1 billion in economic output. Trails and lakes driving an economy? Sounds like the Granite Dells to me.

The City of Prescott plans to at least double our population over the next few decades. This includes a massive subdivision along the eastern side of Watson Lake, lining the Peavine Trail and abutting the Dells, which Prescott has worked hard to keep under the radar. Maybe that's because this land was identified as a high priority for conservation in the city's 2008 Open Space Master Plan. Prescott Valley and Chino Valley have big plans for growth too.

Existing open space won't satisfy demand when the Quad Cities are home to a quarter-million people or more. That's why Save the Dells recognized the need to protect the Dells now as a Granite Dells Regional Park and Preserve.

We've recently heard from concerned landowners that our Park and Preserve proposal lacks details on traffic management, facilities improvements, and minimizing impacts to homeowners.

These are valid concerns, but it's beyond the authority of a volunteer citizen group to make decisions on these issues unilaterally. Private property rights are protected by law and must be respected by all. Therefore, Save the Dells won't propose new public bathrooms or trails on private land without landowner involvement and a clear indication that the land in question will be protected. That's why our vision doesn't include that level of detail.

It's time to ask some serious questions. What lands could be acquired for the Regional Park and Preserve? How do we acquire them in a fair and lawful manner? Would new bathrooms and trailheads be built? Can we improve recreational access without compromising the privacy of existing homeowners or disrupting wildlife?

Here's another big question: where does the state, county, and city stand on providing amenities, services, and land purchases that the public wants? With an election ahead of us with state and county positions up for grabs, you might consider asking these questions to the candidates: which State House candidate will advocate for Noel Campbells' HB2284 Dells Park Bill? When will the Board of Supervisors

realize that much of Yavapai County is rapidly urbanizing and investing in parks will protect our county's heritage?

And while the city election is a year away, it's not too soon to ask: how will Prescott's City Council fund open space acquisitions now that they've spent \$60 million of voter-approved open space tax funds on roads?

To answer these questions, our vision is a formal working group to develop a plan in a transparent and equitable way. We invite the City of Prescott and Yavapai County to convene a Regional Park and Preserve Planning Commission, with members of public advocacy groups, governments, Native American tribes, academic institutions, Dells landowners, and the general public.

Demand for open space is only increasing. Our elected leaders' responsibility is to meet public demand. State and local governments should see the value in this opportunity, and they should take the lead on making this happen. Convening this commission is the right way to start.

Joe Trudeau of Prescott is conservation director of Save the Dells.