

COTTONWOOD ANNEXATION NEEDS OUR ATTENTION

Cottonwood's proposed annexation of 6,479 acres of State Trust Lands within Cornville is causing more public attention, which I am glad to see. People are asking what is going on and how it can be stopped.

Unfortunately, the laws of Arizona that govern State Trust Lands and municipal annexation work in favor of the City. The State must "enhance value and optimize economic return" from its Trust land; and a "pre-annexation and development agreement" will ultimately be required. The State Land Commissioner and State Land Selection Board must approve the agreement. So, in a nutshell, all the City *has* to do is write a proposal that will bring top dollar to the State. Therefore, the agreement focuses on *infrastructure, high density and commercial development*. The agreement is not really a land use *plan* in the usual sense of the word. Rather, it is a means to justify a pre-conceived goal. On top of it all, the City or State *may* seek input from others, but are not required to do so. Unincorporated communities like Cornville are not even listed among those that *may* be consulted.

The agreement, to achieve those big values for the State, flies in the face of land use planning goals established through other legitimate land use planning processes and reaffirmed in the *Verde Valley Regional Plan*. The Verde Valley region has over a decade of planning under its belt. Community, municipal and regional plans emphasize keeping communities from growing together, preserving open space, keeping dark skies, protecting air quality, protecting the Verde River, conserving water, on and on. Those are values that are cherished.

Now, I see Cottonwood jeopardizing those regional values to become an economic center and sprawl dramatically outward. City officials can pretend to acknowledge regional values while they have the legal upper hand; and there is no guarantee that tomorrow's City officials will follow an agreement put together to achieve annexation today. On April 6, the Cornville Community Association sent comments to the City (because the Cornville community planning area overlaps the entire State block); and it is awaiting the City's response.

As observers out here in unincorporated land, the best we can do, in my view, is to publicly influence Cottonwood to develop a reasonable agreement that will serve the Verde Valley as well as it possibly can--*when/if* developers show interest; *when/if* the State Land Department auctions the land, *when/if* the City has to find more water; *when/if* funds are raised to purchase open space; *when/if* voters approve State land reform; *when/if* ... Yes, there are many "*when/ifs*" ahead. That's why today's planning must be meaningful. Hopefully, the City will remember its agreement *when/if* the time comes!

If Verde Valley communities care about their visions and goals, then now is the time for their planners and residents to pay attention and understand what Cottonwood is doing. Environmental and water interests need to keep pushing the City to acknowledge neighboring communities, answer questions, and talk specifics. Together, we might help maximize open space and wildlife habitat; get the trail system we want; keep SR 89A from becoming an unsightly commercial corridor; influence the development pattern; exchange high densities close in for low densities farther out; demand evidence of water planning; urge protection of air quality and dark skies; keep scenic landscape values in mind; and *carefully* plan utilities and transportation routes.

A better alternative would be for the City to do a study of all possible uses, with analysis, alternatives, public involvement and hearings. That would certainly be more in keeping with Cottonwood's own *General Plan*, which promised a "study" and annexation of "*any land proposed for development*" (emphasis added). The first phase of the development of Spring Creek Ranch, now in financial trouble, hardly justifies the City's claim that the State Trust Lands are ready for development and should be annexed now. A comprehensive study or planning process would help answer public questions about preservation options, water availability, and other public concerns.

Still another alternative, whether annexation proceeds or not, is for planners, water groups and environmental interests to unite behind an initiative to raise County or City taxes for protection of open spaces. Other governments have done so. Coconino County and the City of Scottsdale are notable Arizona examples. Then there would be funds to purchase open space parcels. A long shot? Maybe not.

I urge readers to browse these websites and references: www.azleague.org (*A Guide for Annexation, December 2000*); www.ci.cottonwood.az.us (*Cottonwood General Plan, December 16, 2003; also click on "State Land Presentations"*); and www.land.state.az.us ("*Annexing State Trust Lands*", April 2005).

Cottonwood officials have established a stakeholder group to show they are listening. Let's see if that is true. At the first two sessions, they tended to generalize and offer platitudes like "not in our lifetime" to head off questions about their plans. I strongly differ with that view. From a planner's perspective, I believe the future is *now*.

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