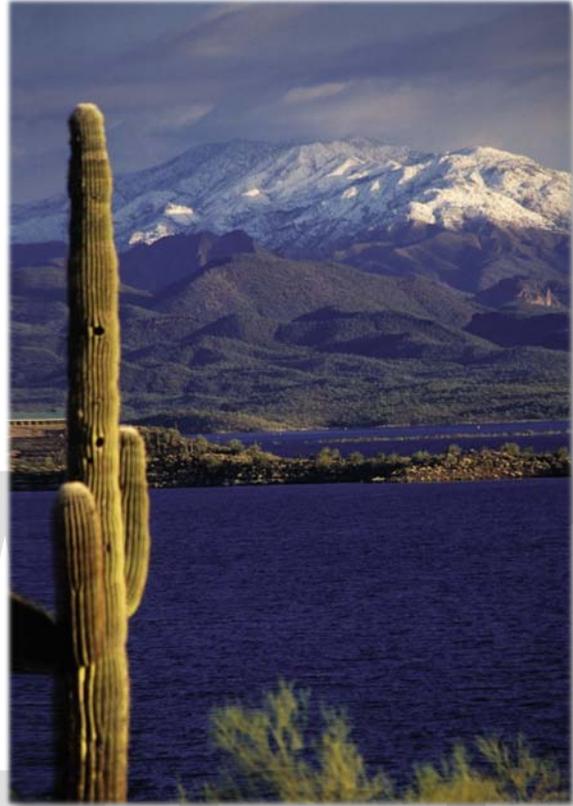


Introduction

The Sonoran Desert provides one of the most beautiful, and fragile, environments on the planet. It is unique, dominated by the Saguaro Cactus (*Carnegia gigantea*) which is found only in portions of Arizona and Mexico. The distinctive beauty of the Sonoran Desert draws thousands of people and tourists to the rugged open spaces of northern Maricopa County. It is this setting in North Peoria that the City desires to preserve in all its beauty and quality for its citizens and generations to enjoy and appreciate.

Recent urban expansion brought development to desert areas previously undisturbed to accommodate a growing demand for housing and urban services. Thousands of acres of irreplaceable Sonoran Desert have vanished or have been altered into urban landscapes. The City of Peoria recognizes the challenge and the importance of planning for proper conservation and preservation of significant desert lands once considered remote or inaccessible.



The development of Lake Pleasant Parkway and Loop 303 has served as a catalyst for commercial and residential growth in northern Peoria. The consequences of development on the desert environment are most apparent in areas that have provided opportunities to enjoy nature and respite from the rigors of urban life. These areas that serve as habitat for a variety of native plants and animals have been transformed into suburban neighborhoods with only a hint of the original character of the land remaining.

Preservation of open space is important because it contributes significantly to the general public health, safety, and welfare. Open space preservation provides educational opportunities; preserves local and regional heritage; provides economic benefit through tourism and varied recreational opportunities. Open space preservation also protects the habitat for threatened and endangered wildlife and sustains wildlife corridors and linkages. In recent years, the general public has become more aware of this consequence and there is a growing trend to identify development options that encourage sensitive, sustainable development that protects critical landscapes and habitat.

The City of Peoria recognizes that the preservation of open desert space is in alignment with the vision of its residents. Without question, there are significant natural features throughout the northern areas of the City that will require some form of protection if they are to remain intact and accessible. These are areas that offer unique, pristine, or nearly pristine features. The City understands that, in order to provide its current and future residents an opportunity to

enjoy these features, efforts will need to be made now to protect these unique environmental settings.

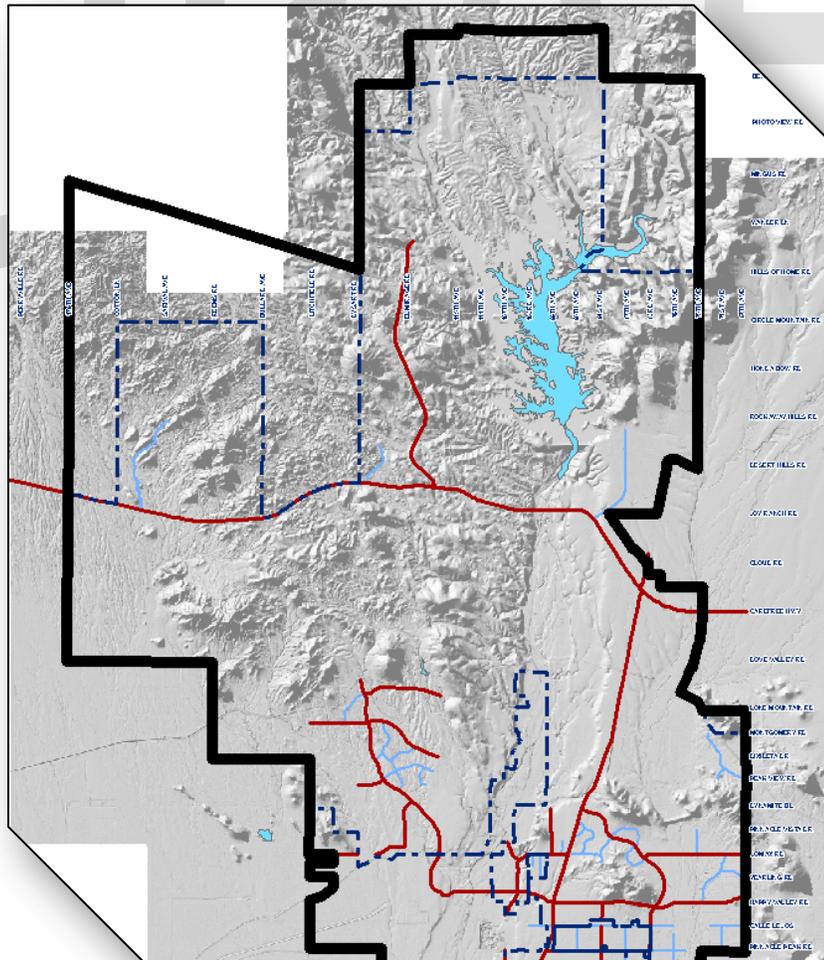
Goal and Purpose

The goal of the master plan is the need to strive for a balance between the protection of natural and cultural resources while providing varied recreational opportunities and still accommodate future growth.

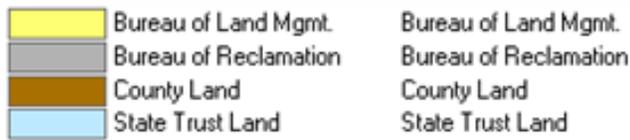
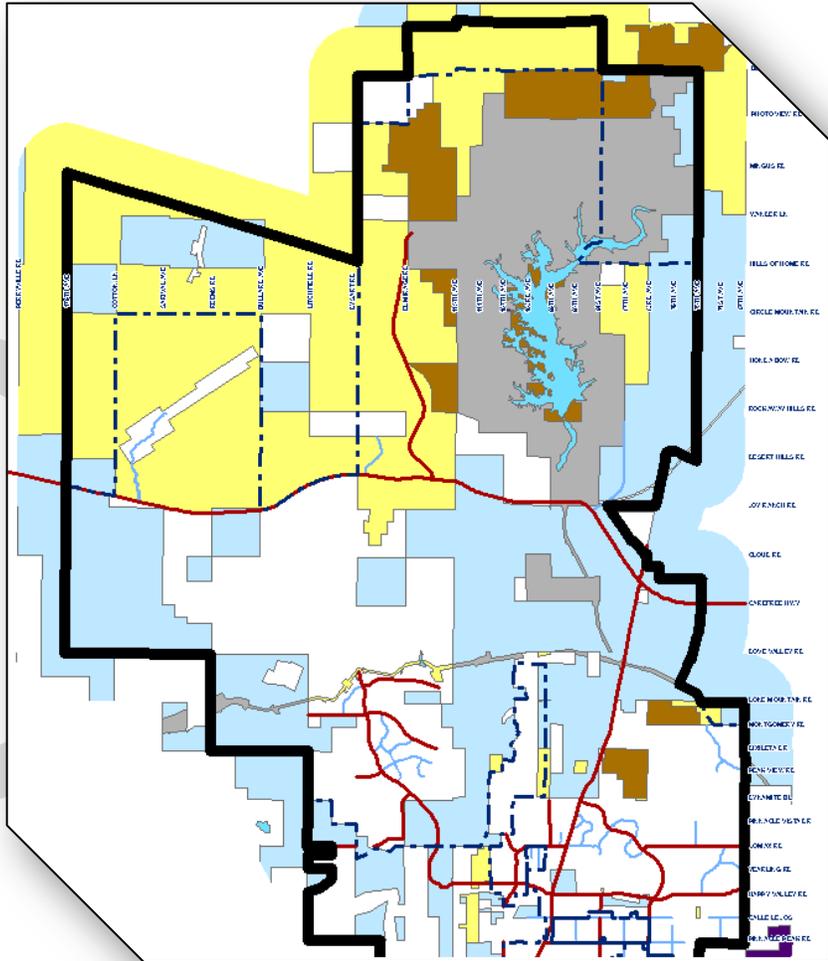
The purpose of this master plan document is to identify areas that merit special consideration and planning strategies that can be used to help protect, conserve, or acquire these special areas. This plan, when implemented, will ensure that much of the natural character of northern Peoria will remain environmentally intact, beautiful, and accessible. All of this will need to be accomplished while respecting the property rights of individual land owners who currently own some of the more unique features in this area.

Project Setting

The study area for this master plan encompasses the full extent of the Peoria Planning boundary north of Pinnacle Peak Road. This area is characterized by significant mountain



foothills, alluvial plains, two major river corridors (the Agua Fria and the New River), Lake Pleasant, and some of the State’s most pristine Sonoran Desert areas. The approximate boundaries are Citrus Road alignment (furthest west), 67th Avenue Alignment (furthest east), Pinnacle Peak Road alignment (southern boundary), and the approximate alignment of Table Mesa Road north of Lake Pleasant Park in Yavapai County (as the northern extent).



The larger landowners are the federal government (Bureau of Land Management – BLM, and the Bureau of Reclamation – BOR), and the State (Arizona State Land Department– ASLD). Federal lands already include some degree of conservation however, not all of this land will be off-limits to development. Also located within the study area are entitled master planned developments (including Quintero, Saddleback Heights, Vistancia, and Lake Pleasant Heights).

This plan acknowledges that there also exist desirable vacant lands sprinkled throughout central and southern Peoria that serve as open space and wildlife linkages as well. The principles developed in this document can and should be used to identify and justify the preservation and/or acquisition methods for such desirable properties for the public benefit.

It should also be noted that open space preservation does not always mean full exclusion of development. Open space preservation properly considered should bring about restrictions or prohibition of development in identified ecologically or biologically significant areas (such as riparian areas, hillsides, floodplains, or cultural and historic sites). However, preservation and conservation planning will also identify suitable areas for active and passive parks, natural open space, and wildlife corridors and trails that link open space or provide contiguous open spaces. Recognizing that some form of development will occur within the Preservation Plan Study Area, the Peoria Desert Lands Conservation Ordinance (DLCO) will ensure that development is sensitively integrated into the environment with sound policies that protect the health, safety, welfare and quality of life for Peoria's residents.

The Value of Open Space Preservation

Public Health. In the public health debate, the value of open space has often been overlooked. Natural systems sustain quality of life and general good health. The protection of watersheds, groundwater reservoirs, surface springs and lakes is a crucial component of the quality of our potable water supply. Hillside protection and erosion control through natural buffers protect the quality of surface water and soil layers essential to the quality of vegetative stands. Plant materials exchange toxic gases for oxygen and cool the local surface temperatures through shade and evaporation – reducing the Urban Heat Island effect and providing rainfall and lower ambient temperatures.

Public Safety. Setting aside proper wildlife habitat and migration corridors help direct wildlife to undisturbed open space and river corridors rather than into urban streets and parks where the interface might be dangerous or even deadly. Acquiring or conserving and maintaining proper public access points, trails, and associated amenities ensures that public enjoyment of natural open space will be safe and appropriate. Acquiring sensitive areas that are threatened, endangered, or unsafe also protects public safety by restricting access in a rational and appropriate manner.

Public Welfare/Quality of Life. Many realize that both the presence and protection of natural areas and wildlife improves the quality of their own lives. Fresh air; opportunities to exercise in the natural environment; inspiring vistas, sunrises and sunsets; stewardship and pride of ownership or involvement all contribute heavily to a person's sense of well-being and quality of life. Providing public access to open space for such disadvantaged social groups to significant landscapes is an appropriate function of government in the preservation, conservation and maintenance of open space.

Educational Value. The Sonoran Desert areas including mountain ridges, washes, and riparian areas provide educational opportunities to the City’s residents. By observing nature in its own element, exploring, photography, painting, and hiking trails through environmentally or geologically significant areas, or by preserving historic sites and features; children, their parents and educators are provided a natural open space classroom unparalleled in many parts of the country. A key objective of this plan is to identify and protect as many of these opportunities as possible. By preserving riparian areas and significant amounts of open space, the preservation of these natural areas will contribute to a better understanding of the relationships between suburban development and natural areas. It will also enable students to study the ecology of the Sonoran Desert, as well as desert wildlife and its habitats.

Recreational Value. The protection and preservation of natural areas, such as mountain ridges, washes, and other riparian areas, contributes to the recreational opportunities available to residents of the City of Peoria. Bird watching, photography, jogging, hiking, biking, horseback riding, fishing, and hunting, are only a few of the many activities that depend on the availability of natural open space. Lake Pleasant and the rugged terrain traversing much of the study area provide abundant opportunities for all types of recreational activities however, these activities may be adversely affected as development occurs within the master plan area.



Economic Importance. Studies show that developments abutting protected open space benefit from an economic perspective. Views and lots that front on natural open space, such as washes and hillsides, usually command a premium and have an economic value higher than lots without these amenities. Additionally, the economic importance of outdoor activities is significant in Arizona. Subdivisions that include well planned ample open space and recreational amenities tend to capture higher prices relative to developments with little or no emphasis on natural open space.

Ethical and Moral Considerations. Loss of habitat and exploitation of natural areas have resulted, or nearly resulted, in the extinction of many animal and plant species. According to Edward LaRoe, of the National Biological Service, *“Extinction is natural ... (b)ut under the forces of population growth, technology and special interests, humans have driven the rate of extinction today to about 100 times the natural rate. Even worse, the rate of extinction is still increasing and will be 100 to 1,000 times faster yet in the next 55 years.”*

The Sonoran Desert is home to coyotes, bobcats, mountain lion, mule deer, rattlesnakes, javalina, roadrunners, and gila monsters. In and around Lake Pleasant and the associated river corridors, pelicans, sandpipers, tarantulas, and hawks, herons, egrets, and eagles have been observed. Tarantulas, toads, lizards, and salamanders inhabit the hills, ravines, washes and springs. But their numbers are in jeopardy through seemingly endless expansion of suburban development unless the City can articulate a balanced approach to development, conservation, and preservation.

Historical Significance. The river corridors of North Peoria contain several significant and important Native American and contemporary historic sites. The Hohokam established settlements along the Agua Fria and New River corridors between 1 AD and 1450 AD. The Hohokam were renowned for their extensive irrigation canal systems, ballcourts, platform mounds, and skills with shell and stone. There is some evidence that pre-Hohokam occupation existed along the Agua Fria north of Jomax Road between 2000 BC and 1 AD.

From the late 1870's through the 1900's mining and ranching became dominant economic activities (to a point of over-grazing). Small outposts and small farming communities have either been absorbed or have become ghost towns. The foothills of the Bradshaw Mountains are home to over 40 mining ghost towns.

In far northern Peoria, west of Lake Pleasant, Castle Hot Springs is one of those ghost towns. Castle Hot Springs once served as the territorial winter capital of Arizona and was both the residence of the Territorial Governor and a local jail. The first telephone in Arizona was installed at the resort (and the telephone number was "1"). During its heyday, Castle Hot Springs was considered one of the premier resorts in the United States.



Small farms and citrus groves once thrived on tracts of land adjacent to the Agua Fria and the New River – these have now all but disappeared. Currently sand and gravel operations actively quarry portions of the Agua Fria for construction materials used in urban development.

Intrinsic (natural) Value. *Intrinsic value* is based on a perception of true value in terms of tangible and intangible factors (such as quality, uniqueness, ownership, and environment). Scenic views are one aspect of an intrinsic value. The colloquialisms: “beauty is in the eye of the beholder” and “I’ll know it when I see it” are examples of intrinsic value. Intrinsic values are almost impossible to quantify because of different values to different people, but this does not imply intrinsic values aren’t important. An objective of this plan is to define intrinsic natural values as broadly as possible and to protect as much of those values as possible for the greatest range of public enjoyment. Open space preservation properly planned will provide some with a sense of freedom, others with a sense of solitude, and others still with awe and inspiration.

Types of Open Space

There are a variety of types and uses for open space. This is important to understand as it may dictate the planning for development or the funding for acquisition. Planning may identify a variety of acceptable uses for the open space. Funding may be limited by the type of open space that the City should acquire on the public's behalf.

Some of the more common uses for open space include:

1. Open Space for the preservation of natural resources such as wildlife corridors, wetlands, springs, and such.
2. Open Space for the preservation of cultural resources such as archaeological sites, historic buildings or sites and such
3. Open Space for passive recreational uses that are in conjunction with preservation of natural attributes, such as trails, and scenic overlooks.
4. Open Space for the managed production of resources such as agriculture, orchards, and in some cases mining.
5. Open Space for active outdoor recreation such as parks and large bodies of water.
6. Open space for public health and safety such as flood impoundment areas, catchments, fire breaks, and such.

The master plan focuses primarily on the first three common uses as these are generally most beneficial to the general public. The last three are important uses but can be best achieved through conservation agreements and practices, are subject to a different funding sources, or are the focus and responsibility of other agencies.

General Plan Goals and Objectives

There are a handful of elements that are considered desirable when describing preservation-worthy land. The City recognizes that these elements are not only desirable to the City for purposes of preservation, but also to the holding entity or individual for the potential economic value they may add to the land itself.

A key objective of this Plan is to obtain ecologically and historically significant open spaces for the purpose of enriching the lives of the City and its residents. Because the City is unable to acquire all desirable lands, it must plan and prioritize areas that serve the public with the greatest benefit. Some areas may be protected simply for their aesthetic value, while others may be set aside for wildlife, or serve as connections between public trail corridors.

The City also desires to preserve many of the culturally significant sites that are sprinkled throughout the northern portions of the City. These sites are at risk of adverse modification or elimination due to development pressure. Ultimately, the City's goal is to incorporate a

meaningful network of cultural and historic sites into preserved open space as educational enhancements to the outdoor lifestyle enjoyed by Peoria citizens and all Arizonans.

In general, land use planning is reactive or proactive. In most circumstances, policies are applied when land development projects are submitted for agency review. This is the reactive approach to land use planning. This master plan represents a more proactive approach to preservation of lands considered significant for open space preservation. As such the program will be somewhat detached from individual development proposals with the City of Peoria taking the initiative to obtain commitments or acquisition of identified open space parcels.

The plan's strategy is three-fold: cooperative agreements with Federal and County agencies for lands north of State Route 74; coordination and cooperative planning of State Land parcels that contain natural, scenic, and/or significant cultural sites; and discussions with private land owners to obtain conservation easements, dedications, or acquisitions for identified significant parcels or portions thereof.

With regard to Federal and State Lands, the Federal Recreation and Public Purposes Act (R&PP) and the Arizona Preserve Initiative Program (API) provide guidance for the identification, cooperative agreements, and acquisition of land for open space purposes. These are further discussed in **Appendix A: Federal and State Policies and Programs**

Federal and State lands have particular use requirements and policies governing access and improvements. The City's General Plan and various codes and policy directives also provide governance regarding access and development. Unincorporated areas within the master plan area are subject to Maricopa County Plans and codes.

Plans consulted in the preparation of the master plan include but are not limited to the following:

- *City of Peoria General Plan 2010*
- *City of Peoria Zoning Code*
- *City of Peoria Desert Lands Conservation Guide (manual)*
- *Peoria Parks, Recreation, Open Space and Trails Master Plan*
- *Wittmann Area Drainage Master Plan*
- *North Peoria Area Drainage Master Plan*
- *Upper New River Area Drainage Master Plan*
- *Agua Fria Watercourse Master Plan*
- *Lake Pleasant Parkway Design Theme Manual*
- *Loop 303 Specific Area Plan*
- *Lake Pleasant/North Peoria Area Plan*
- *Lake Pleasant Parkway Corridor Specific Area Plan*
- *City of Peoria Infrastructure Design Guidelines*
- *State of Arizona Groundwater Management Act of 1980, 4th Management Plan*
- *MAG Environmentally Sensitive Lands*
- *MAG West Valley Multimodal Transportation Corridor Master Plan*

Case Studies: Regional Open Space Plans.

The City of Peoria has an advantage through the experiences of other communities in their quest to preserve natural resources within their boundaries. Six plans were surveyed as appropriate local and regional models. There is variation in approach, governance, and structure, but all include some element of private/public partnerships and cooperation with State and Federal agencies. The case studies are further documented and summarized in **Appendix B: Case Studies**

Case studies include:

- the Maricopa Association of Governments *Desert Spaces Plan* (a regional look at open space within Maricopa County and policy recommendations).
- the City of Phoenix *Sonoran Preserve Master Plan* (a master framework for the prioritization and preservation of significant desert lands in northern Phoenix).
- Pima County *Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan* (a conservation plan for the county initially in response to the Section 10 of the Endangered Species Act with regard to protection of Pygmy Owl habitat).
- the Salt Lake County (Utah) *Open Space Acquisition Plan* (a county-wide plan that used GIS to identify natural areas to guide a trust fund established for the express purpose of obtaining significant lands for public acquisition).
- the City of Scottsdale *McDowell Mountain Preserve Plan* (a city plan to guide acquisitions made through a trust fund financed by a city sales tax for the express purpose of obtaining open space).
- the Town of Cave Creek *Open Space Initiative* (a recent initiative that enabled the town to obtain State Lands for the creation of the Spur Cross Ranch Conservation Area).

