

JANUARY 2015

CITY OF PEORIA, ARIZONA

# SONORAN PRESERVATION PROGRAM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Photo courtesy of Adam Pruett

Peoria, Arizona covers some of the most beautiful and biologically diverse natural desert lands in Maricopa and Yavapai counties. The area contains Lake Pleasant, located in the foothills of the Hieroglyphic Mountains and surrounded by some of the last vestiges of the Sonoran Desert in the Phoenix metropolitan area.

The region is also distinctive from the standpoint that two major water courses – the Agua Fria and New River – run through the northern portions of the City. Along and between the between the river basins is a rich reserve of cultural resources. The region’s Sonoran Desert is also one of the most beautiful, unique and

fragile environments on the planet. Although one of the hottest deserts in North America, it receives enough rainfall to support a diverse and lush environment including the distinctive Saguaro Cactus.

The distinctive beauty of the Sonoran Desert draws both residents and tourists to these rugged open spaces. This setting – unique ecology and biodiversity, significant cultural sites, and beautiful, scenic landscapes – that the City of Peoria desires to preserve for its citizens and future generations to enjoy and appreciate.

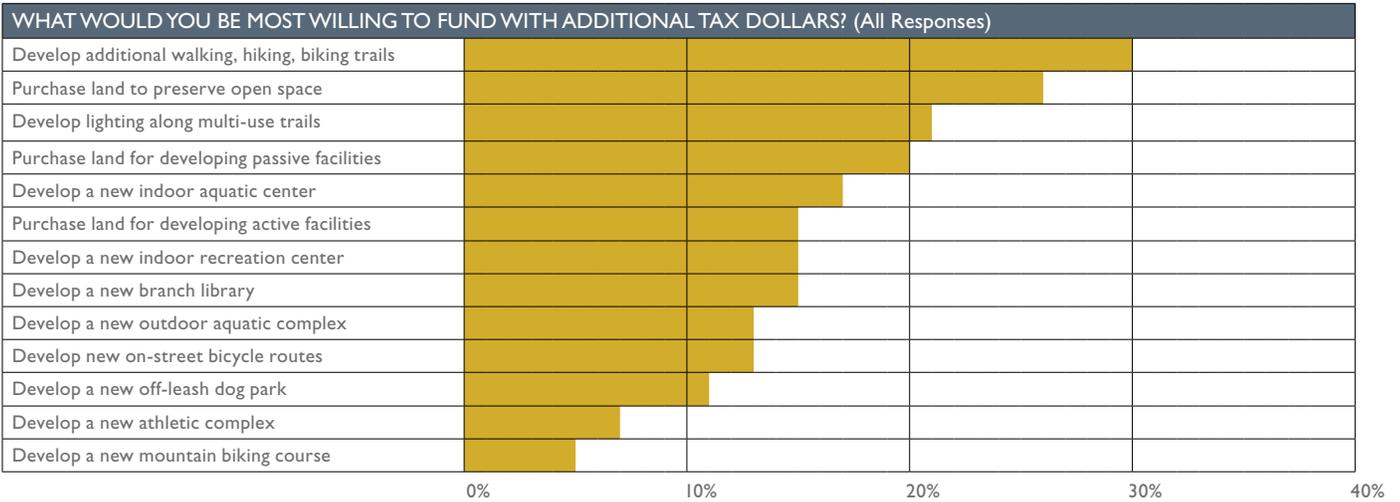
## WHAT IS PEORIA’S SONORAN PRESERVATION PROGRAM?

THE PURPOSE OF THE SONORAN PRESERVATION PROGRAM IS TO IDENTIFY AREAS THAT MERIT CONSERVATION AND FEASIBLE STRATEGIES TO FULFILL OUR COMMUNITY’S VISION:

“Provide a high quality living environment, offering a diverse mixture of quality housing opportunities for various income levels, accompanied by employment and commercial opportunities that minimize the necessity to drive long distances and which are designed for sensitive integration into the desert environment. Weaving throughout the planning area will be a series of significant active and passive desert open space areas that provide wildlife habitat, scenic vistas, recreational and cultural opportunities, and enhance the overall quality of life for residents in the planning area and the City of Peoria and which will be managed to ensure their use and preservation for future generations.”



# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Peoria residents and business leaders recognizes the challenge and the importance of planning for an appropriate balance in conservation and preservation of significant desert lands in balance with future growth. The 2013 Parks and Recreation Needs Assessment Survey found that 84% of respondents agree or strongly agree with the statement that preserving open space and the environment provides benefits to their household. The study found that households are most willing to fund (up to \$10/month in new taxes): development of additional walking, hiking, and biking trails (30%), land purchases to preserve open space and green space (26%), and purchase land for developing passive facilities (20%) – all of which are open space related.

### PLANNING PROCESS

The planning process consisted of four primary tasks:

1. Identify planning area, review available data, community needs and trends (Chapter 1)
2. Inventory critical resources (Chapter 2)
3. Develop goals, criteria, and open space types, then prioritize focus areas and projects according to community values (Chapter 3)
4. Match priorities with conservation tools and funding sources, and determine land management strategies (Chapter 4)

### KEY ELEMENTS OF THE VISION FOR THE SONORAN PRESERVATION PROGRAM

- Prioritize ecologically and historically significant land
- Provide abundant, high quality recreational opportunities
- Create an extensive open space network for future generations to enjoy
- Implement effective funding and conservation strategies



## EXISTING CONDITIONS



Founded in 1886 and officially incorporated in 1954, the City of Peoria has grown from the original one square mile in Oldtown to a city covering more than 179 square miles with a Municipal Planning Area of over 233 square miles. With a current population of over 160,000, Peoria is one of Arizona's largest cities and at build-out will approach half a million people.

The Sonoran Preservation Program study area focused on the city's entire planning area. The area includes the watersheds of the Agua Fria River, the New River, and Morgan City Wash. The northern portion of the city also contains the foothills of the Hieroglyphic Mountains as well as small isolated mountains (e.g., Westwing, East Wing and Sunrise Mountains along with Calderwood Butte), and low-relief terrain such as fan terraces and alluvial valleys.

Lands within the planning area are owned by a number of landowners, the largest of which are federal and state. Most of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) land within the study area is undeveloped, though mining and grazing claims may exist. The second largest land holder, the Arizona State Land Department (ASLD), is responsible for the management of State Lands with a mission "to manage State Trust lands and resources to enhance value and optimize economic return for the Trust beneficiaries."



### FLOODPLAINS AND WASHES

There are a variety of stream courses in the planning area, which range from minor drainage to primary river corridors. Increased density of riparian vegetation provides food and cover for a wide variety of desert wildlife. These washes also serve as movement corridors for the larger mammals and provide habitat for smaller mammals, reptiles and birds. It is essential to maintain the habitat value of these wash areas if the character and environmental quality of northern Peoria is to be preserved.

### WILDLIFE

Open spaces within Peoria support an abundance of wildlife that is typical of Sonoran Desert habitats. The number of animal species is lowest in the less complex, low-relief habitats in the south and is highest in the topographically diverse Hieroglyphic Mountains area. The Sonoran Desert is home to coyotes, bobcats, mountain lions, mule deer, rattle snakes, javalina, roadrunners, and gila monsters



### HISTORIC AND CULTURAL RESOURCES

There are many known areas of significance within the planning area. Overall, cultural sites documented in 709 reports were identified and assigned a sensitivity rating based on their scientific value. The majority of these sites (73 percent) fall within the mid-range sensitivity level and ten percent are of the highest sensitivity level, such as village and pueblo sites.

### SCENIC RESOURCES ASSESSMENT

A primary goal of this master plan is to preserve the natural beauty of Sonoran Desert landscapes in northern Peoria and protect the local desert community character. Peoria's landscape character was evaluated according to BLM's visual resource management system to highlight potential conservation opportunities.

## PEORIA OSDSS

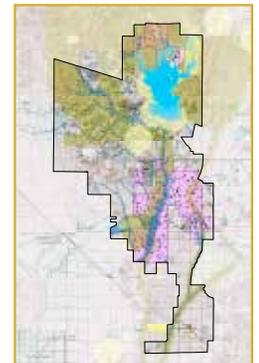
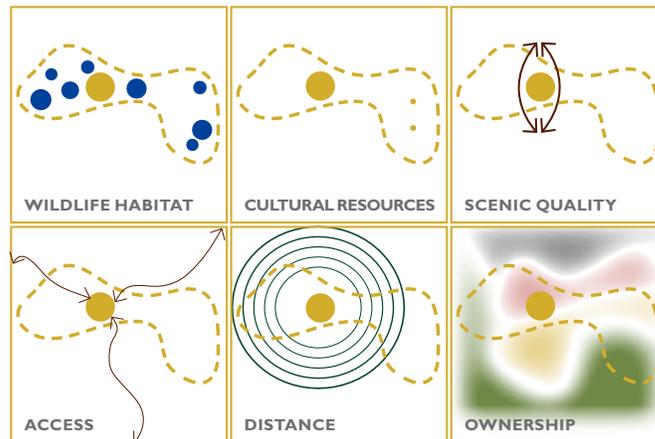
A Decision Support System was developed to identify sensitive lands that merit special consideration for conservation. The model used over 20 datasets to identify and prioritize areas that merit special consideration for protection, and can be updated as prioritization and criteria change over time to meet the changing needs of the City.

### OSDSS MODELING PROCESS

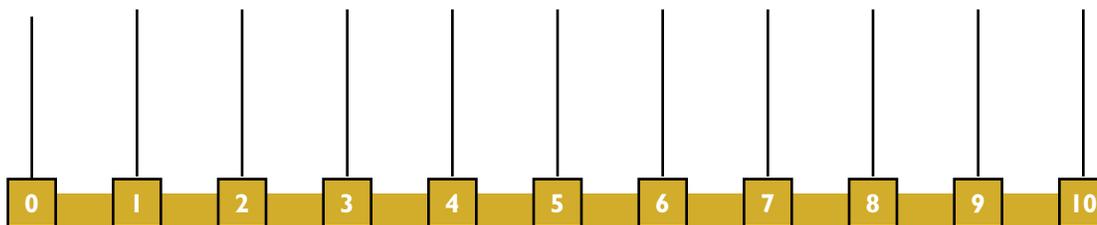
#### CRITERIA

Prioritization begins with determining which criteria will be input to the model:

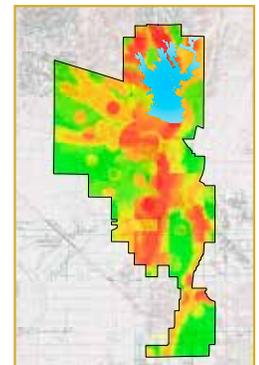
- **Cultural Resources:** Are there important cultural resources in the area?
- **Scenic Quality:** Does the area have important scenic qualities?
- **Access:** Is the area reasonably accessible?
- **Distance:** Is the area close to other protected areas or parks?
- **Wildlife Habitat:** Does the area have important habitat values or other biological resources?
- **Ownership:** Does existing land ownership complicate purchase or management, or does it facilitate conservation agreements?



#### VALUES



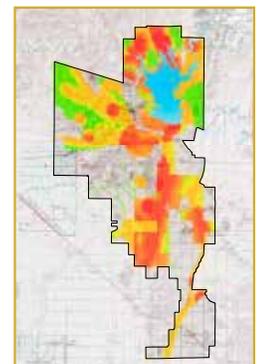
Inputs to the model include GIS datasets such as wildlife corridors, wetlands, cultural sites, washes, and other variables. These inputs are weighted from 1-10 based on the community's values and their level of importance for protection. The City has the ability to continually alter weights and criteria to reflect current visions and needs.



#### FILTERS

Final prioritization of potential projects can be accomplished by applying the following filters:

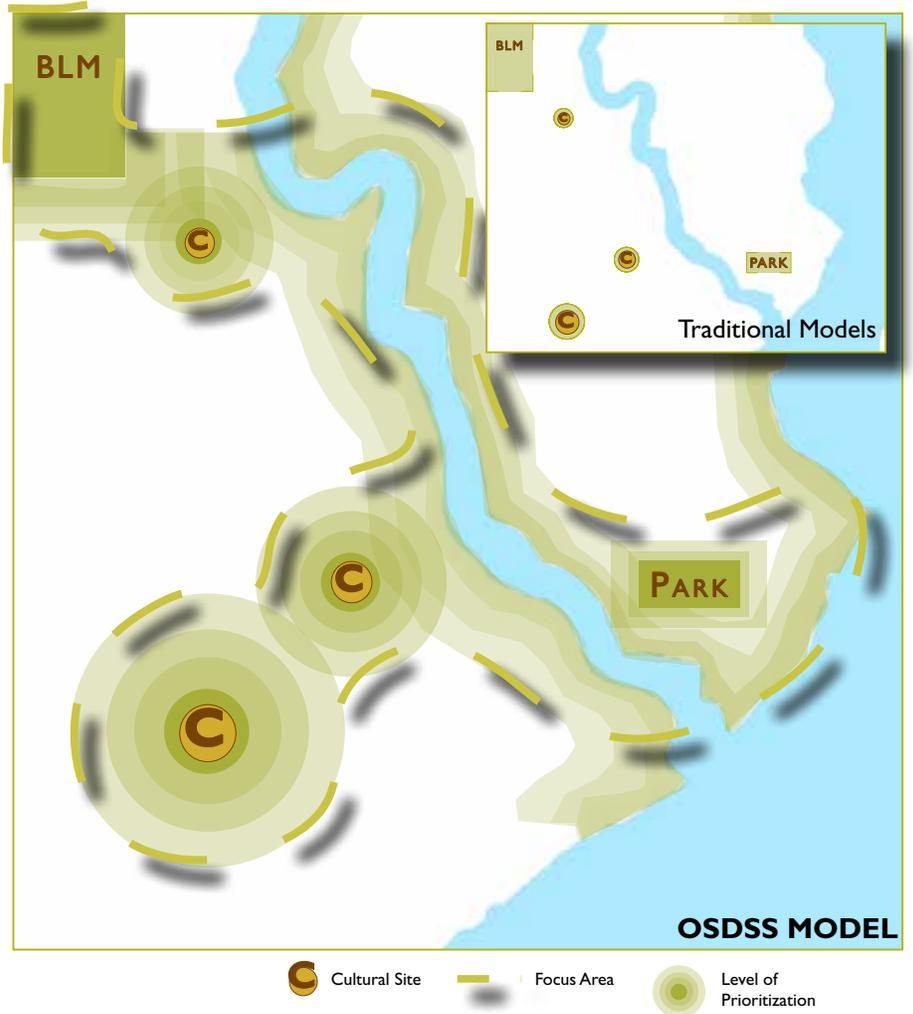
- **Resource Protection**, which prioritizes key cultural and historic sites based on their sensitivity.
- **Low/ Minimum Public Cost**, which prioritizes lands based on lowest cost to the community (dedication, public lands, protected by code).
- **Best Value**, areas with high resource value for lowest cost.
- **Complete Open Space Program**, which combines all three filters.



## A HOLISTIC MODEL

Traditional models (inset) overlay resources to identify localized areas of interest, often resulting in isolated pockets of conserved lands. The Peoria model goes one step further, defining contiguous focus areas based on how resources relate to one another. As seen in the diagram above, this method provides a more connected method of open space utilization. The system focuses on protecting multiple resources, their local and regional connectivity, and a mosaic of habitats and experiences.

Focus areas are those areas that were identified through the model as having the highest level of importance for protection. Each area is generally defined on the Focus Areas map (next page) to allow flexibility in the development of subsequent implementation strategies or negotiations. Each of the three open space types are represented; the Agua Fria corridor is a combination of both Natural/Sensitive and Heritage/Culture resource considerations.

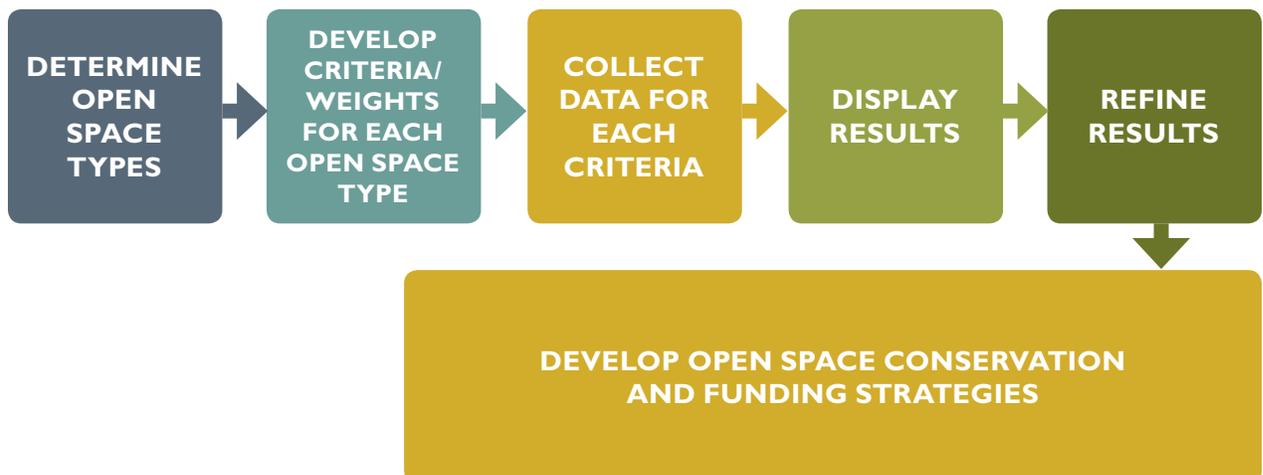


## KEY OPEN SPACE TYPES

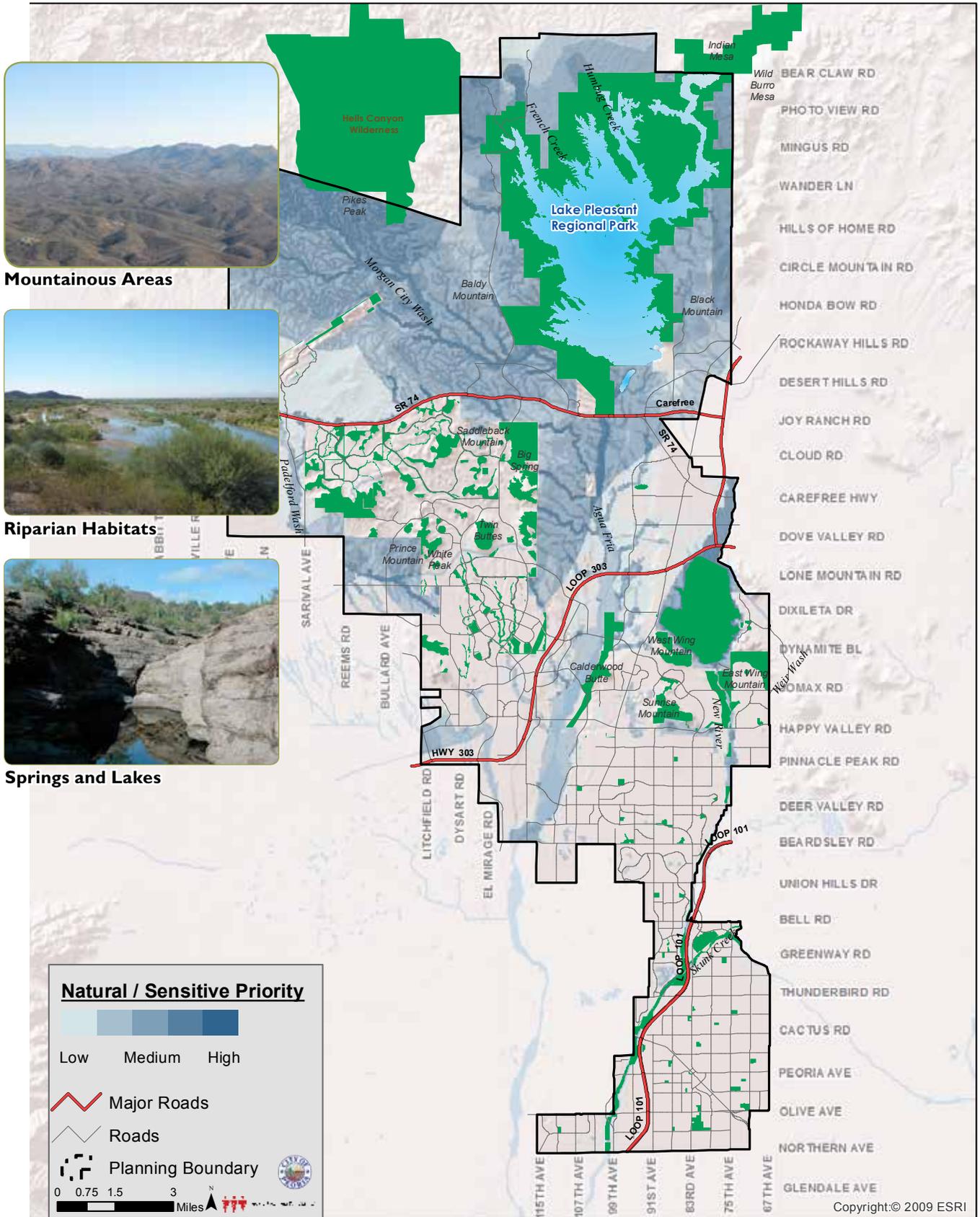
Existing protected areas include dedicated open space and other non-saleable lands, such as city and regional parks. This plan identifies three additional key open space types to meet the prioritization goals represented in the Vision: Natural/Sensitive, Cultural/Heritage, and Passive/Managed. Each open space type emphasizes certain resource types, but may protect other resources as well.

The maps on the following page illustrate the values and weights applied to the open space type. For example, to identify priority natural/sensitive areas, resources such as critical wildlife habitat, areas with protected species received the highest weighting.

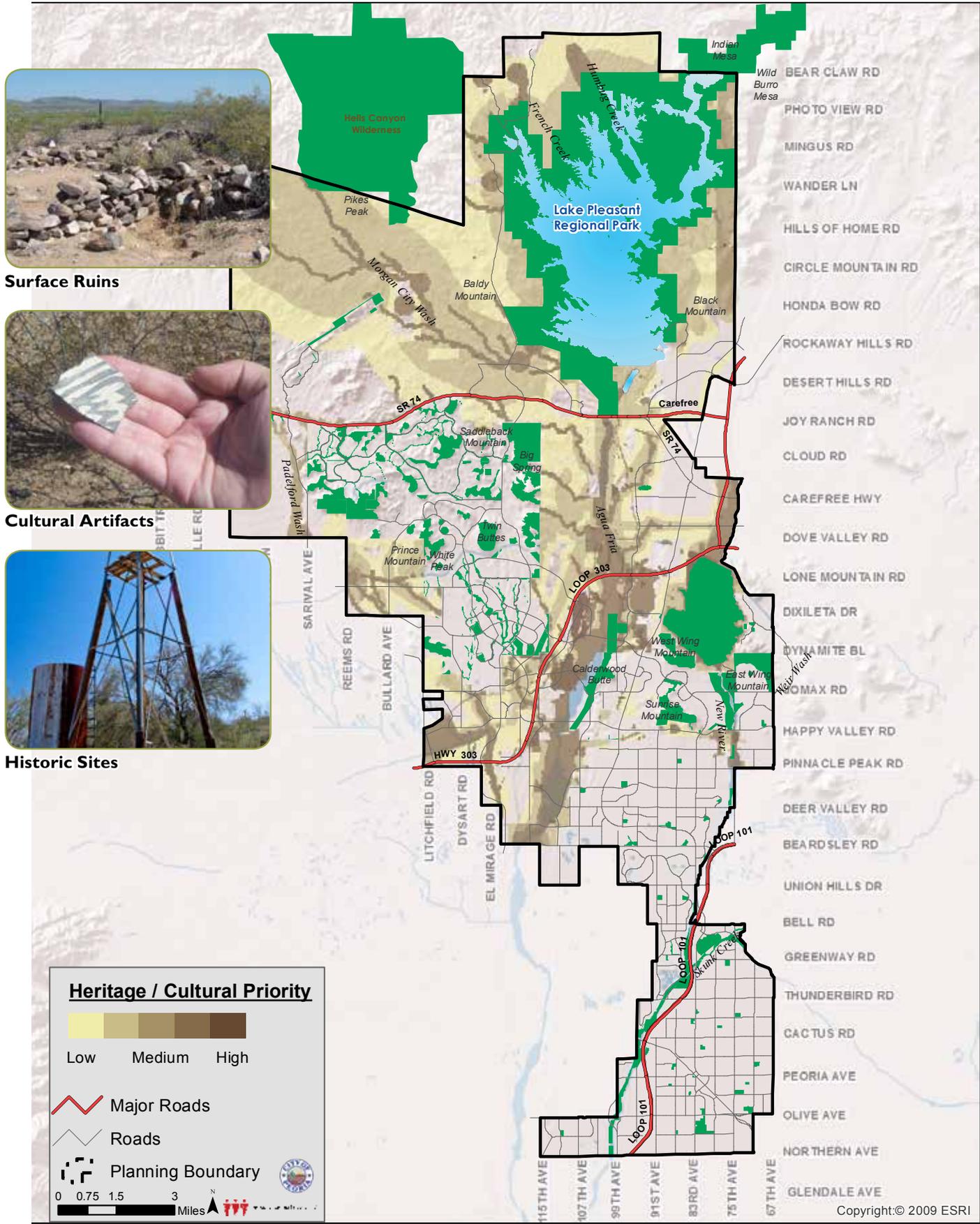
## PRIORITIZATION STEPS



**NATURAL/ SENSITIVE:** Protects areas of general wildlife importance in conjunction with other sensitive resources and wildlife corridors.



**HERITAGE/ CULTURE:** Protects sensitive cultural resources and sites. The intent of these areas is to provide protection from mining, urban development, and grazing; areas emphasize conservation over public use.





## FUNDING STRATEGIES

Despite the strong policy basis for land conservation found in City plans since the late 1990s, the City has been challenged to put in place a reliable funding source to acquire and steward open space lands. The five tools pursued by the City to date are 1) land dedication requirements found in the Hillside Ordinance and the Desert Land Conservation Overlay (DLCO), which requires high value open space to be set aside or dedicated by developer as part of the development approval process, 2) revenues from open space bonds, 3) revenues from the City’s open space development impact fee, 4-5) revenues from the state Growing Smarter program and Arizona Heritage Fund.

As a results of recent legislative changes, these dedicated impact fees for these programs do not exist. In addition, the Federal Land and Water Conservation Fund, State Lake Improvement Fund, Environmental and Conservation grant funds and Historic Preservation programs recently have been eliminated or diminished. The cumulative effect is a major loss of funding resources for conserving Peoria’s rich cultural, natural and recreational resources. Peoria now relies almost solely on one tool, private land open space dedications through the Hillside and DLCO entitlement process which can only be applied in specific and somewhat limited circumstances.

All conservation strategies would rely on a sustainable funding stream for long-term acquisition, capital improvement, and maintenanc from a diversity of sources - some mechanisms will likely require voter approval. The use of a dedicated sales or property tax is the ‘work horse’ of most programs in Arizona: Prescott, Phoenix, Coconino County and many others have implemented a sales or property tax dedicated to land conservation and related purposes.

**TRADITIONAL FUNDING SOURCES THAT PEORIA HAS RELIED UPON FOR LAND CONSERVATION ARE NO LONGER AVAILABLE, AND THE REMAINING FUNDING IS INADEQUATE TO ASSEMBLE AN INCLUSIVE AND ECOLOGICALLY VIABLE NETWORK OF CONSERVATION AREAS.**

The good news is that open space preservation measures demonstrate strong voter support in Arizona. Out of 27 ballot measures in Arizona since 1988, 95% have passed. Scottsdale voters passed 0.15 percent and 0.20 percent sales taxes that are estimated to yield up to

PRIVATE LANDS	ARIZONA STATE TRUST LANDS	BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT
<b>RECOMMENDED CONSERVATION STRATEGIES</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Mandatory Dedication of Open Space through DLCO</li> <li>CEs or PDRs</li> <li>Saleback or Leaseback</li> <li>Fee Simple Acquisition</li> <li>Land Exchange</li> <li>Donation</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reclassification as API lands and Fee Simple Acquisition</li> <li>Revise Future Land Use Designations and Density Transfers</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recreation and Public Purposes Act</li> <li>Fee Simple Acquisition</li> </ol>
<b>RECOMMENDED FUNDING SOURCES AND STRATEGIES</b>		
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dedicated Sales Tax or property tax</li> <li>Open Space Bonds</li> <li>Property Assessments / Special Districts</li> <li>General Fund Taxes</li> <li>Local Government Partnerships</li> <li>Federal, state, and non-profit grants</li> <li>Capital Campaigns, Corporate Donations, and Gifts (individual, planned, memorial)</li> <li>Volunteer and In-Kind Services</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dedicated Sales or Property Tax</li> <li>Federal, state, and non-profit grants</li> <li>ASLD Partnerships and Intra-Agency Staff Consulting</li> <li>Volunteer and In-Kind Services</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recreation and Public Purposes Act</li> <li>Dedicated Sales or Property Tax</li> <li>Federal, state, and non-profit grants</li> <li>BLM Partnerships and Intra-Agency Staff Consulting</li> <li>Volunteer and In-Kind Services</li> </ol>

\$500 million over a 30 year period.

### LAND CONSERVATION STRATEGIES

The master plan defines a three-fold strategy, shown on the previous page: 1) cooperative agreements with Federal and County agencies for lands north of State Route 74; 2) coordination and cooperative planning of State Land parcels that contain natural, scenic, and/or significant cultural sites; and 3) discussions with willing private land owners to obtain conservation easements, dedications, or acquisitions for identified significant parcels or portions thereof.

All of this will be accomplished in partnership with other departments, agencies, interest groups, and active citizen involvement.

### FOCUS AREAS

A variety of parcels have emerged as having significance or important resources worth protecting or conserving. The sites were grouped into the following three categories in order to recommend timing for protecting them:

#### Primary Focus Areas:

Highest recommendations for acquisition

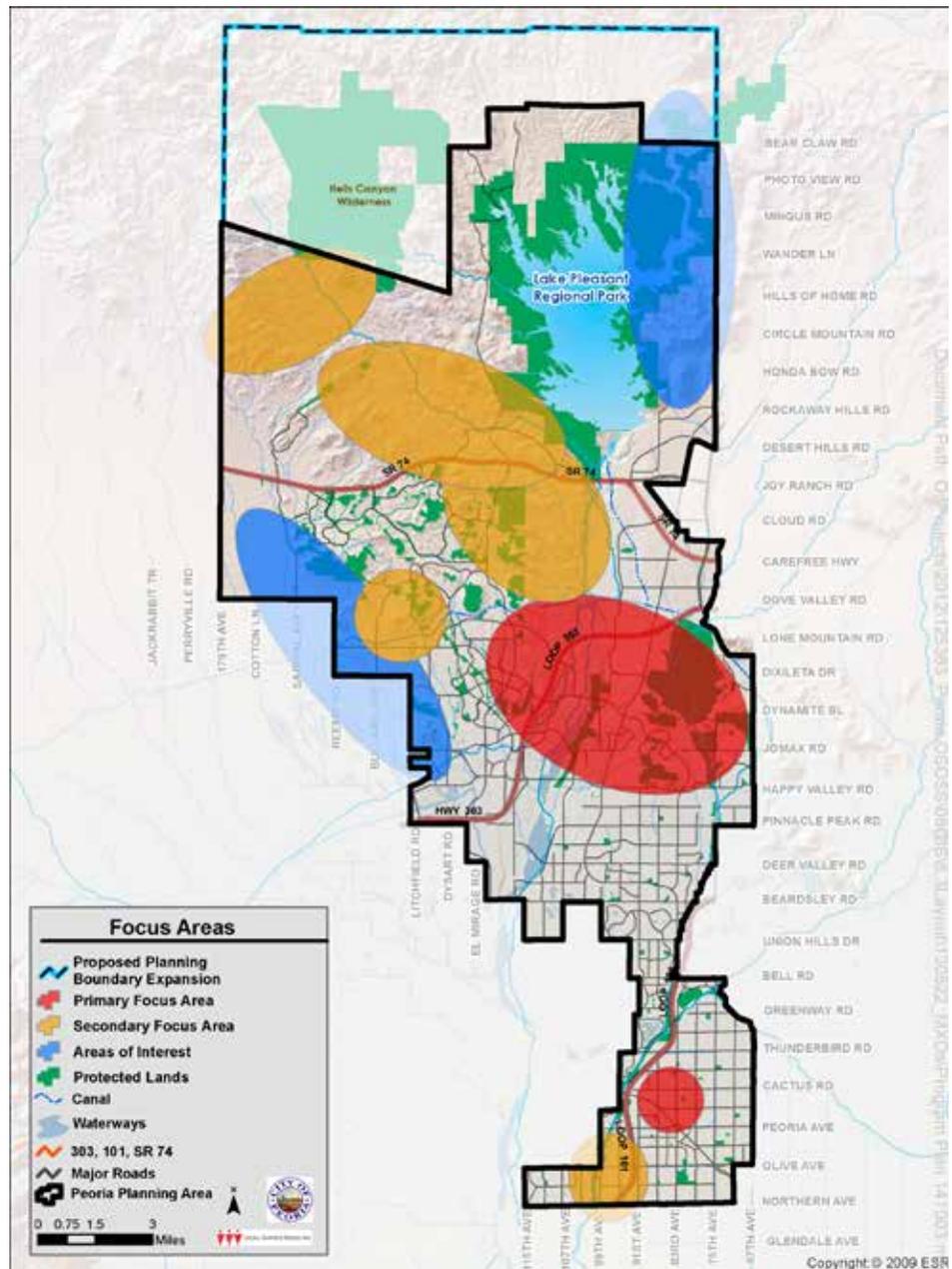
#### Secondary Focus Area:

Significant Parcels that need to be monitored for development pressures

#### Areas of Interests:

Areas without direct development pressures or that may need further study and assessment

**THIS PLAN RECOMMENDS A THREE PRONGED STRATEGY FOR THE THREE DISTINCT TYPES OF LAND OWNERSHIP, AND SECONDLY, PROPOSES A SPECIFIC REVENUE TOOL IN ORDER TO SATISFY PUBLIC DEMANDS FOR OPEN SPACE AND PASSIVE RECREATION.**



**THE CITY OF PEORIA IS DETERMINED TO PRESERVE AND MANAGE THE BEST OF THE AREA'S UNIQUE ECOLOGY, CULTURAL HERITAGE, AND BEAUTY THROUGH THE SONORAN PRESERVATION PROGRAM.**

## CONTACT

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