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COMMENTARY

Local landowners seek to address extreme threat to San Pedro watershed

By Peter Else 2 hrs ago

As chair of one of the landowner-based organizations challenging the Army Corps of Engineers' failure to consult with the Fish and Wildlife Service on the proposed Villages at Vigneto development's wildlife impacts, I feel compelled to explain the harm this proposed development would bring to our watershed and to explain who are the so-called "outsiders" and the "extremists" in this debate.

Not everyone in the San Pedro watershed wants a massive new retirement community — essentially a medium-sized city — to pop up in the last remaining natural river ecosystem of southern Arizona. The organization I lead represents landowners who promote conservation of the San Pedro ecosystem's water resources that support the area's rural lifestyles, sustainable working landscapes, hunting, and ecotourism.

Most of our members have lived in Arizona long enough to have witnessed what happens when you try to support rapid housing growth in the desert with massive year-round groundwater withdrawals. Everyone in the region is forced to dig deeper and deeper wells. Natural riparian vegetation dies. You no longer live in a rural community where you can hunt, grow food, and live in harmony with Arizona's wildlife.

Instead, you fight traffic caused by tens of thousands of new residents who have a very limited sense of place, going to strip malls that look like every other stick-and-stucco strip mall in the Southwest. The proposed Vigneto development will bring these unwelcome water resource and traffic impacts not only to Benson, but to the entire watershed.

We have witnessed the death of major river ecosystems in Tucson and Phoenix. Like everyone else, we've become resigned to the fact that the major watersheds of the so-called Sun Corridor are now supported by imported water, and rely on land in the San Pedro watershed to

mitigate impacts on wildlife habitat caused by rapid development sprawl in the growth corridor.

Arizona is currently in an extended drought and has a lower priority for receiving Colorado River water via the Central Arizona Project. Will we now allow this sprawl to take over the last desert river ecosystem available to mitigate growth impacts in the Sun Corridor? If so, we would be destroying the very wildness that attracted people to this part of Arizona in the first place.

Given these facts, it appears to many of us that it is “extreme” to allow an outside corporation and a single municipal government in the watershed to rapidly push through a continuously growing plan for a new instant city larger than Flagstaff, without first examining the impacts this new plan will have on a hemispherically important desert river habitat.

We need to look before we leap at the first sugar daddy who emerges from an air-conditioned office in Phoenix with a plan for building a lush Italian city in the middle of the Sonoran Desert.

We did our best to get the Army Corps and the Town of Benson to listen to rural conservation interests, but their ears have been deaf to the long-term concerns about the impacts to the river and to nearby landowners.

It is not extreme to want to keep one of our last free-flowing rivers flowing. It is not extreme to be concerned about a truly sustainable economy. It is hardly extreme to ask that the government give this proposal a good hard look and that it seek to minimize or eliminate the harm to our precious river.

It is extreme, however, to stand idly by and watch our river and the land and ecosystem it supports dry up to profit big developers.

Peter Else is chair of the Lower San Pedro Watershed Alliance.