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## Concerns about Vigneto's environmental impacts continue

Possible approval of Community Master Plan less than a week away

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BENSON – With possible approval of the Vigneto Community Master Plan less than a week away, members of the public spoke out at Monday's city council meeting about environmental impacts they fear will come with the Villages at Vigneto development. Light pollution and the need to protect the dark sky as well as concerns about water were the two predominant issues the council listened to during the call to the public. Sierra Vista resident and local astronomer Bob Gent, who is a past president of the International Dark Sky Association and has worked on lighting code updates with Cochise County and the City of Sierra Vista, spoke about the need for updated outdoor lighting codes in Benson, as well as incorporating those updates into the Vigneto Community Master Plan.

With some 60 astronomical observatories built around the Benson area, the region attracts a large number of tourists because of a fascination for dark skies, Gent said.

He expressed concerns about the negative impact light pollution will have on the region and offered to work with city council, planning staff and the planning and zoning commission to update the city lighting code and minimize those impacts. "I have professional astronomers and lighting engineers who will work with you pro bono in helping to update the Benson lighting code. ... I think with so much development there is a risk the light pollution could be a real problem for this area," warned Gent.

Despite his concerns about the night sky, Gent applauded the development for the economic boost it is expected to bring to Cochise County. "As a resident of Sierra Vista, I am intimately aware of the job loss, the population loss and the lack of economic development we've had in this area," he noted. "And I really encourage and thank El Dorado for stepping forward to make this opportunity (available) to all of us. ..."

Joannah Hinz, a research scientist with the MMT Observatory located on Mount Hopkins in the Santa Rita Mountains, also spoke about light pollution concerns. Representing the MMT as well as other professional observatories in the area, Hinz said because of the critical placement of the Vigneto development in

relation to the observatories, there is a need for high quality outdoor lighting design. "Dark sky protection is also important at Kartchner Caverns, which has applied to become an International Dark Sky Park, and we supported their application to do so," she said. The Association of Arizona Professional Observatories and Space Sciences Labs is urging an updated version of the city's outdoor lighting code, added Hinz, who requested that the city consider forming an outdoor lighting code committee.

She said that Gent and members of the MMT Observatory would volunteer to be part of the committee to help make changes to the "very old and outdated lighting code." Environmental activists Tricia Gerrodette and Anna Lands also spoke, with both women pushing for a USGS Phase III study, which they feel is an important piece of information needed to "better understand local aquifers and the connections they have with the San Pedro River and Kartchner Caverns."

The study, estimated to cost around \$1 million, represents the last phase of three USGS studies that have been conducted in the area. "It is important to get an understanding of the best, most recent information that we have on our aquifer and connections to the (San Pedro) River and Kartchner Caverns," said Gerrodette. "I am here to urge that you do whatever it is in your power to urge the USGS study to proceed." Gerrodette argued that the study would allow for the assessment of ongoing environmental impacts and help predict future impacts. "This study and the necessary and important resulting model will not happen quickly," she said. "But the effort does need to get started so we can eventually have a better understanding of the impacts of groundwater pumping on private wells in the area, including artesian wells in St. David and Pomerene, in addition to impacts to the San Pedro River and to Kartchner Caverns."

Another member of the public, Karen Corey of Bisbee, told the council that she had served on the Cochise County Planning and Zoning Commission for 13 years during the development of the San Pedro task force, which led to the San Pedro Partnership and the writing of the county's water conservation and outdoor lighting regulations. "I am one of those pesky people from outside the city who takes the stewardship of the San Pedro river basin as a sacred trust and want to address my concerns before you meet to make a decision on the Villages at Vigneto next week," she said. After going through an itemized list of environmental concerns, Corey ended her comments with, "I'm afraid this development will undo and set backward any positive effects Fort Huachuca and the San Pedro Partnership have made on water savings and recharge." Vigneto's Tuscan theme also came under attack by Corey, who objects to the master plan's golf courses, water features and vineyards. "This valley is a desert that should be loved, respected and cared for as it is meant to be," she said.

While there were no Vigneto CMP supporters who spoke at Monday's council meeting, they are expected to have a strong presence on July 18 for the 7 p.m. public hearing at City Hall, where the CMP will be discussed. The hearing will be followed by a special meeting to "discuss and take possible action" on the plan.