

Estrella Regional Park Master Plan Update
1/29/15 Stakeholders Meeting
Estrella Regional Park Nature Center
Buckeye, AZ

Participants: Jeff Bitton, Doug Williams, Don Harris, Joy Bruyer, RJ Cardin, Jamil Coury, Christina Underhill, Nathan Torres, Jennifer Johnston, Adam Ricks, Jennifer Waller, Michele Kogl, Michael Martinez, John Rose, Sally Kiko, Elijah Williams, Gretchen Erwin, Brian Murphy (by email), Leigh Johnson, Cate Bradley (apologies for any missed names that were not on the sign-in sheet).

Meeting Agenda

- Welcome and introductions
- Planning Process
 - Background
 - Existing conditions
 - Other influencing factors
 - Future options and possibilities
 - Desired outcomes
 - Trends
 - Proposals
 - Concept maps
 - Discussion/questions
- Next steps
 - Meeting wrap-up
 - Refine park improvement opportunities
 - Public meeting schedule
 - Stakeholders meeting schedule

Welcome and Introductions

Leigh introduced herself and Cate as the meeting coordinators and facilitators and asked everyone to introduce themselves.

Planning Process

Leigh kicked off the meeting with a Power Point presentation that covered the existing conditions, other influencing factors, future options and possibilities, desired outcomes, trends, proposals, concept maps, discussion and questions (see full presentation at <http://www.maricopa.gov/parks/estrella/emproject.aspx>).

Leigh said the Maricopa County Parks and Recreation Department Vision and Mission, respectively, are: *“Our vision is to connect people with nature through regional parks, trails and programs, inspire an appreciation for the Sonoran desert beauty and natural open space, and create life-long positive memories”*, and *“Our mission, through responsible stewardship, is to provide the quality parks, trails, programs, services and experiences that energize visitors and create life-long users and advocates.”*

The Estrella Mountain Regional Park operational theme is *“1) strategically develop facilities that increase the revenue generation capacity of the park and park system; 2) preserve the natural setting and environmental aspects of the park by heavily restricted use and limited public access; 3) devote resources to the repair and replacement of existing infrastructure.”* A stated sub-theme for the park is *“it is recommended that Estrella Mountain Regional Park feature development that encourages increased usage by RV campers, to the degree that an RV campground with advanced and updated facilities be considered. Additionally there is a need for a*

challenging short trail at this park. This facility would strongly enhance the use of the trails and other amenities of the site, as well as generate substantial venue for the System.”

Leigh showed a map of the park from the 2009 Master Plan. The park is roughly 20,000 acres under management agreement with the BLM through the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. It is about 4.5 miles east/west and 7 miles north/south. The map identifies various use areas that include picnic area, camping, trails, equestrian arena, turf area, a golf course, and a competitive track. In addition to the undisturbed desert setting, this park has some important cultural and historic resources which contribute to the overall origin/ interpretation story.

The park is operated mostly from revenues generated through the County park system with only a small amount of the operating budget coming from the County General Funds. This is one of 10 parks in the County system. Recently, the City of Goodyear completed Transportation and Parks and Trails Master Plans that may help inform this planning effort, at least from the perspective of adjacent or proximal lands.

Desired outcomes of the County for this process include:

- To meet community needs
- To meet County needs
- To build collaborative partnerships
- To be award winning

Leigh talked about relevant trends to consider in this process – park visitation, population growth, and recreational opportunities.

And she discussed briefly, three use proposals that have been presented to the County for consideration – the Estrella Youth Sports, El Rio Watercourse Master Plan, and the City of Goodyear/Bureau of Reclamation Brine Wetlands proposals. More information on each will be found later in these notes.

Discussions

Cate asked the group to comment on the trend and issues they see related to the park. Responses included:

Reduced and Declining Use

- Entrance fee is \$6
- Fuel costs to get to the park
- Location and travel distance
- Public doesn't know the park is here
- HOA parks offset the need (perceptions)
- Other organized sports events are competing for the busy schedules of kids and families
- Generational changes and trends affect use patterns (70s and 80s visits to parks were more compatible without the influences of electronics and technology)
- The "iron rangers" don't keep head counts
- Method of counting users is more improved now than it was so original numbers/estimates may have been too high
- Demographic changes/family sizes and a change in cultural usage (less Hispanic users than before)
- Other opportunities nearby without costs
- Need to offer special events and reasons to come back
- Aging facilities (i.e. the rodeo arena, etc)
- No showers and other facilities like that
- Trails here are challenging (too tough, sandy, rocky) for the casual user
- Users want specific destinations for specific outdoor recreation uses
- Need to identify and promote the "niche" of this park

- Surrounding cities' populations are on the rise but public awareness of park is not broad – the park is not well known
- Front door of park is not inviting, back country of park is beautiful but the front does not reflect that
- Front entrance gives a mixed visual message – golf course, turf – need to clarify the message of what this park is beyond the front entrance
- There have been very few updates at the park since 1980s
- Entrance to park from roadway is confusing
- Need a safer entry off Vineyard (safer left turn from the bridge)
- Need to identify and define what the park does well and market that message
- Trailheads are not inviting and not clear to find

Following is an email with input from Brian Murphy who could not attend the meeting:

Here are a few of my ideas for Estrella Mountain Park Regional Plan. I think the disparity between it and the White Tanks and McDowell is rather stark. I am very excited and hope this new plan becomes a blueprint to expose what an asset the park is and begin to remove years of neglect.

1. Camping: While there is the availability of open camping much of the area leaves a lot to be desired. Both McDowell and White Tanks have full hook up RV sites available. This should be a priority for the general plan. There is significant room to do so in multiple areas of the park.
2. Showers and a good centralized location for camping: Both McDowell and White Tanks have this available. Estrella should as well.
3. Camping at the Coldwater Trailhead: This area is very unique to Estrella. None of the other parks have the ability to drive into the heart of the trail system, which is the main draw of the park. Camping here should be encouraged. This would be a great spot to take the family for one or two nights and feel miles away from home but be only a few minutes away. It is a large area that could easily accommodate tents, trailers, and RVs. This could also serve as a great spot to backpack further into the park and camp. The end of Pederson trail has a great open area that could serve as a primitive site.
4. Maricopa Trail: While not part of the park plan as it is a trail, they certainly go hand in hand and must be together. The entire purpose of the Maricopa Trail is to encourage visitors to travel from park to park via the trail. If the desired route of the trail is not in the general plan we could end up with it merely passing through, which would be a tremendous shame. I would like to advocate for the trail to enter the park, then utilize some existing trails, and finally continue to the competitive track. The lack of connectivity from the park to the competitive loop puts the park at another disadvantage. The lower participant numbers from the competitive events at all parks is evidence of this disparity. McDowell and White Tanks have easy accessibility from the competitive loop to the rest of the park. Including the Maricopa Trail as a connector begins an important step to utilizing the entire park, instead of allows several acres to waste away.
5. Improved field facilities: While there is a current plan to have multiple baseball fields this to me is rather limiting. The fields should be as multiuse as possible. There is certainly a huge need for both as I have learned while serving on the Goodyear Parks and Recreation Commission. Having multiuse fields allows the park to draw multiple users that otherwise would not visit the park. The full grown trees within the park are very unique to Estrella as well. These should be maintained as much as possible with new fields.
6. A paved path: There is a neglected paved path around a portion of the park. This should be repaired and made to circle the entire park.
7. Improved Competitive Track Facilities: This is one of the most neglected and forgotten parts of the park. A plan for this area needs to be included. Running water actual restrooms are in serious need.
8. Partnerships: The present state of finances for all park programs and systems throughout the valley are in distress. The need to collaborate with other local governments should be a priority, specifically Goodyear. Goodyear is in need of a large community park and Estrella is in need of a broader user group to increase available income.
9. Volunteers: While there are camp hosts there remains a lack of direction for collaborating with volunteers within the park. The park needs a volunteer program that allows those that wish to help to do so and feel productive at the

same time. I personally have had to be rather persistent with offers of help, specifically trail work. I have finally been able to build a great working relationship with Don and the Maricopa Parks staff and feel as though my input is now valued. It took a long time to reach this point.

10. Beginner Trail: The Gila trail is a nice trail but it is restricted to hiking only. The Quail leads to great trails but has a rather intimidating climb. Horseshoe is also good but leads to a trail frequented by Corral West. The steady use makes the trail rather dusty and rutted. Horses can also be intimidating for new hikers and bicycles. A dedicated trail for Corral West also allows for a more enjoyable experience for their clients as well. A trail that stayed near the lower regions of the park would be a great way to encourage hiking and biking but not be too intimidating or heavily traveled by equestrian traffic.
11. Improvement of Baseline Trail: This trail is a gem that is so close to the nature center but in serious disrepair. Some good work here would allow the park to showcase a great short hike that does not venture too far into the park. There are tremendous views that can be obtained in a few short miles.
12. Riparian area: This area should be incorporated into the master plan. It is unique to Estrella and shows the tremendous wildlife diversity of the desert. The unique qualities of the park really need to be amplified and included in the master plan.

This is by no means a complete list but I think many of these are dependent on the other. To include a master plan with no reference to the future of the trail system could not be considered comprehensive. I could not be more excited to be a part of this planning. I have spent a lot of time in the park and see the potential. I look forward to being able to attend the next stakeholder meeting. I'm sorry I could not attend this time. - Brian Murphy

What Trends are Relevant Here?

- Confluence of 3 rivers here is unique
- Eco-tourism to promote natural and native habitat experience
- Place for fitness
- Back country trails
- Front country trails to increase experience on tougher trails
- Broad flat area in front up against mountain terrain
- Mountain bike opportunities
- Parking staging areas
- Wildcat trail building
- What are County parks known for? The mountain and golf course image is a contradiction
- Access to trails by arena is hard to get to and hard to find (need way-finding)
- ATV use and industry are here and need to be addressed
- Youth trends with equestrian use are increasing, older users are going out with wagons to access back country (arena provides classes to train for use, habitat, history of the area)
- Need to consider wheel accessibility (strollers, wheelchairs, etc.)
- The origin story of this park is a strong feature
- Technology and gadgets can be used for geocaching, trails apps, fitness stations, etc.
- Web technology placement is critical to increase the marketing outcomes (the park page needs to be the first page hit when people are searching the internet) – 80% of equestrians at the arena are from the internet
- Connector trails within the park tied to Google maps and other platforms (get trails embedded into Google maps)
- Range of recreation opportunity from easy to challenging to extreme
- Trails to destination(s) within 2 to 3 miles that capture views, features, seasonal variation, diverse experiences
- ASU survey results indicate user desires to be in peaceful areas without crowds and enjoy nature
- Youth sports bring clubs and tournaments (there is a deficit of facilities in the West Valley)
- U of Phoenix stadium and other attractions draw visitors who have not been in the desert before (some stay in RVs, proximity to I-10 for tourism is a benefit)
- Park has 12 trailer pads, mostly used for seasonal hosts which number about 21 in high season

- Currently no camping in park
- Need more RV camp/pads/hook-ups

Proposals and Concept Maps

Leigh introduced three external proposals and concept maps for uses, mostly in the northern part of the park. RJ clarified that these proposals are compatible with the mission of the County Parks and Recreation Department (P&R Dept):

- To support, align with and be compatible with the County's vision and mission
- To be, at least, revenue neutral or positive to the County
- To improve the park in general
- To be a collaborative process
- To encourage and build partnerships

Each entity described their proposal.

ESTRELLA YOUTH SPORTS

Proposal to use the front flat land to develop an organized youth sports facility (ball fields) that would be administered and managed by Estrella Youth Sports (EYS). The vision is to feel a large need for more ball field areas that would include hosting regional tournaments. EYS projects this will attract 130K people per year to the park who will pay either entrance or parking fees, some of that revenue will go to the County for operations revenue for the rest of the park; EYS will work with park managers to coordinate event schedules to avoid high season visitation conflicts; EYS will raise \$10M from private sources for this proposal and will work with the County P&R Dept. on various issues in the master planning process.

EL RIO WATERSCOURS MASTER PLAN

Maricopa County Flood Control District (FCD) is looking at flood control options along the Gila, Salt and Aqua Fria rivers on the northern edge of the park. The FCD proposal includes pilot and demonstration projects for wildlife and habitat restoration to increase public attraction to the rivers, economic development for surrounding properties, trails related to the Sun Circle Trail plan, lake area features for other recreation opportunities and water storage possibilities in partnership with the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). At peak flow this area conveys 230K cubic feet per second. This proposal will use information learned at Tres Rios about vegetation, salt cedar control along about 10 miles of river banks and provide research information about vegetation management that could be useful to the P&R Dept. to manage the park.

CITY OF GOODYEAR BRINE WETLANDS

The City proposes to create sub-surface wetland basins for bio-treatment of secondary treatment wastewater prior to discharge into the river bed. While the basins would be sub-surface, the discharge area would be a riparian area (wet) and would attract wildlife and riparian vegetation. The City, with its consultants, have identified the north edge of the park to be most suitable for a project like this. They estimate a need for 40 to 50 acres at build-out (depending on the volume of treated water which is related to growth on Goodyear), but would develop this in phases starting with about a 20 acre pilot site.

Other Discussion Points

John talked about the opportunities to connect trails to the Maricopa Trail (MT). He talked about where trailheads are needed as that regional trail vision is being planned and implemented. Estrella Mountain RP is a trailhead on the MT. There is a broad coordinated effort to make the MT at reality with cooperation and collaboration from the City of Good year, Sun Circle Trail, Avondale parks and Friendship Park, White Tanks, Buckeye and Buckeye Hills. There is a possibility to connect some of these to the BLM wilderness area. It would be beneficial to communicate with the Gila Indian River Community and request their participation in these regional trails discussions.

Who Else Needs to Be Involved In The Estrella Mountain Regional Park Planning Process?

BLM

AZG&F

County Supervisors to encourage diverse population representation

Estrella High School

Desert Edge

E.M. Community College

PIR

Avondale Youth Council

Goodyear Youth Council

Guiding Mission Statement for this Process

Estrella Mountain Regional Park offers sports fields, hiking, and multiuse trails, camping, picnicking, and riparian habitat and undisturbed desert area conservation and provides its visitors with high quality facilities – making it a sought after destination for cultural, historic and natural resources. One unique feature of this park within the whole County park system is the equestrian use infrastructure.

Next steps

- Discuss “things to improve” at the park

- Coordinate a site visit for meeting participants

- Provide other maps of critical areas (AZG&F, etc)

- Discuss how existing facilities are falling short

- Identify the park “jewels”

- Discuss what the destinations are and why

- Understand the park system master plan