



Commissioner Veronica Escobar
Precinct 2
Press Advisory



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TOURISM COMMITTEE CALLS FOR EL PASO CITY COUNCIL TO ADOPT A NEW NATURAL HABITAT AND OPEN SPACE ZONING ORDINANCE

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EL PASO – El Paso County's new Ecotourism Committee, which is being spearheaded by Commissioner Escobar, is recommending that the City Council adopt a new Natural Habitat and Open Space Zoning Ordinance for land owned by the City of El Paso and any other land which chooses such designation in an effort to enhance ecotourism opportunities in El Paso. This category would apply to PSB land, open space donations, lands under permanent conservation easements, neighborhood open space like Thunder Canyon, & lands owned by conservation organizations with preservation of the natural space in perpetuity, however does not affect private land that could be developed.

Natural habitat open space is defined as wild land areas that are undeveloped and still in their natural state. Protecting more natural habitat open space in the foothills of the Franklin Mountains and surrounding area will help to protect important habitat for wildlife in the area while enhancing important ecotourism opportunities. The value of protecting natural habitat open space will also help the city create more nature focused outdoor opportunities for children growing up in El Paso, something that is largely lacking due to past emphasis on creating parks that focus on play grounds and playing fields.

All across the country a growing number of educators and psychologists have identified an early childhood and teenage development problem called Nature Deficit Disorder, a behavioral condition resulting from too much time growing up in front of computer screens and TV sets. More natural habitat open space will prevent this condition and help children growing up in the city have more opportunities to connect with nature.

The committee hopes that the new ordinance will both encourage and empower the City Council to protect more natural open space before ongoing development activities cause what remains to completely disappear. The Open Space Master Plan for El Paso recommends the creation of an Open Space Zoning Category (Page 6-2, Recommendation A-2). Cities such as Denver, CO, Boston, MA & Pasadena, CA have already adopted a similar ordinance.

The Eco-tourism committee commends the City for the tremendous progress it has made in addressing natural resources and improving upon sustainable development initiatives. Some of these initiatives include:

- Adoption of the Parks and Recreation Master Plan for El Paso;
- Adoption of the Open Space Master Plan for El Paso;

Coordinated with El Paso Water Utilities on land preservation opportunities while also actively seeking funding for open space acquisitions;
Adoption of a rewrite of the City's Subdivision and Zoning Code;
And adoption of Landscape Regulations

These benchmarks would be complimented with the adoption of an Open Space Zoning Ordinance.

There is a clear need for this ordinance; note that Resler Canyon, now preserved in perpetuity in its natural state by the Frontera Land Alliance land trust, is still zoned for apartments. A Natural Habitat and Open Space Zoning Ordinance on city owned and other property seeking the designation will allow the city to preserve the publicly owned arroyos and other ecologically and aesthetically important areas (e.g. PSB lands) and create scenic corridors, such as along Trans Mountain Road, which will enhance our quality of life and promote ecotourism opportunities. Ecotourism has the potential to have a major impact on the City both economically and in enhancing quality of life if natural open space can be protected for future generations.

The City Council meeting on June 24, 2008 may raise issues around zoning options available for protecting open spaces. For further information, please contact Kevin Von Finger at (915) 581-2555.

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