

VII. OPEN SPACE & RECREATION

“... areas and locations of any lands reserved for parks, trails, recreation, camping, preservation, including public and private properties; proposed or planned additions and the relationship to regional open space systems.” (Yavapai County General Plan, p. 77)

A. Existing Conditions

1. Introduction. Open space can be described as “lands available for public use and enjoyment”, often administered by federal, state or local government. Open space also includes natural resource areas like preserves and refuges, parks, greenways, golf courses and sports complexes that provide a place to participate in recreational activities. Open space needs to be proactively planned and in some cases designed. Open space planning includes consideration of geographic features, natural and cultural resources, dark skies and recreational opportunities.

The Cornville Planning Area is characterized by 20,194 acres of Coconino National Forest lands and 7,798 acres of Arizona State Trust Lands. These lands surround private lands within the planning area; and they are instinctively regarded as open spaces without regard to other possibilities. When considering open space issues, however, all lands in the planning area should be considered to determine growth patterns, regardless of ownership. State Trust Land must be considered equally with other lands since, strategically, State Trust Lands could remain open space or they could be developed. Depending on ownership patterns, public interest, and resource values involved, the same can hold true for National Forest lands.

The public open spaces are the primary areas where dispersed recreational activities occur. They also provide access to Oak Creek, Spring Creek and the Verde River. Page Springs Fish Hatchery, managed by the Arizona Game and Fish Department; and Windmill Park, managed by Yavapai County, and the privately-owned Verde Santa Fe Golf Course provide developed public recreational opportunities.

Trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding are high on the list of recreational pursuits in the community. Informal trails on public lands are well used. A Trails Committee has been established by the Community Association to identify routes and work together with the Forest Service and neighboring trail groups to develop a safe network of non-motorized trail opportunities in the planning area. Motorized vehicle (e.g. dirt bikes, ATV's and jeeps) enthusiasts are also interested in trail opportunities. Trails are discussed in more detail under the Transportation Element of this Plan.

Public access to Oak Creek is available at three locations—Windmill Park at the Cornville Road Bridge, Page Springs Road Bridge, and Mormon Crossing on Willow Point Road. There is also one public access point to Spring Creek at a low water crossing on Willow Point Road. All other access points to the creek are held by private property owners. Fishing, swimming, canoeing, rafting, tubing and water play are primary creek activities.

2. National Forest: Within the Cornville Planning Area, all 20,194 acres of National Forest are part of the Coconino National Forest, administered by the Red Rock Ranger District, headquartered in Sedona. Forest Service activities in the planning area include livestock grazing; protection of riparian zones, wildlife habitat and cultural resources; fire control; management of recreational uses and abuses; and resolving urban interface issues. Some National Forest parcels within the planning area are identified for possible exchange. The community favors maintaining National Forest land as open space; with allowance for exchanges or permitted uses that would benefit the community, such as for parks or other public purposes.

Management of the Forest is guided by the “*Coconino National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan*”, completed in 1987. An Amendment to the Coconino National Forest Plan, known as Amendment 12, was approved in June 1998, for additional protection of the Red Rock Country surrounding Sedona. The boundary of the amendment area crosses the northeast corner of the Cornville Planning Area. Planning for the rest of the Coconino National Forest lands, including those in the Planning Area, may begin in 2005 or 2006. When the process begins, Forest officials will involve the public to identify issues, propose management alternatives and analyze environmental impacts before final planning decisions are made. The Community Plan can be a helpful reference for Forest Service planning and residents will be encouraged to become involved.

3. State Trust Land. Within the Cornville Planning Area there are 7,798 acres of State Trust Land. One large parcel of particular significance consists of 6,480 acres (over 10 square miles) and is intersected by State Highway 89A between Cornville and Page Springs Roads. The parcel is unincorporated and lies within the Cornville postal area. The future management, disposition, and potential loss of open space on the parcel are major concerns of communities throughout the Verde Valley. In its adopted general plan, the City of Cottonwood has designated the parcel as a Special Study Area, even though it is outside the city’s corporate limits. The City’s plan “strongly recommends that the communities of the Verde Valley work regionally to preserve as much of this area as possible. However, before disposition by the State Land Department, any lands proposed for development should be annexed into the City of Cottonwood” (*Cottonwood General Plan*, p. 14). However, the State Land Commissioner and State Selection Board determine if and when Trust land will be annexed by a municipality. The Cornville community shares Cottonwood’s desire to preserve as much of the area as possible and maintain open space between communities. Because of overlapping interests, it will be important for the Community Association to work cooperatively with the City of Cottonwood, Yavapai County and other Verde Valley communities to determine the future of these important lands.

The Arizona State Land Department (ASLD) manages State Trust Lands “to enhance value and optimize economic return...consistent with sound stewardship, conservation and business management principles...” (*ASLD Mission Statement*). The State requires that fair market value must be obtained from all Trust land transactions, which include sales and commercial leasing. All revenues from the sale of Trust lands are placed in the Permanent Fund, which is invested and earned interest distributed among the beneficiaries, primarily for the benefit of public schools.

The Land Department has done little planning or analysis of the Trust land in the Verde Valley; however, there are recurring possibilities of preserving certain parcels within the Cornville Planning Area. In 2000, as part of the “conservation reserve” proposal, 826 acres, known as the Sheepshead Canyon parcel, was proposed by ASLD for conservation, but the proposal was not

approved. Later, two parcels, totaling 800 acres (portions of Sections 7, 18 & 16, T. 16 N. R. 4 E.), covering much of the earlier conservation reserve area, was included in a proposed State Trust Land Reform as “incentive land”, to protect those parcels. The Verde Valley Land Preservation Institute recommended the areas due to their importance as pronghorn antelope habitat. The Reform proposal, with goals to obtain economic benefits for the Trust and to identify lands eligible for conservation in urban and rural areas, was submitted to the Arizona State Legislature for consideration in 2004. A referendum relating to exchanges of State Trust Land was defeated in the November 2004 election; however, reform options, including an initiative, are still being considered. Any reform must ultimately go to Arizona voters for approval. Monitoring the status of such recurring proposals requires continual vigilance and regional cooperation.

Other activities on State Trust Land include one livestock grazing lease that covers over 7,000 acres. In addition, the Lime Kiln Trail (see Transportation section) crosses State Trust Lands in the northern part of the planning area.

4. Page Springs State Fish Hatchery. The Page Springs Fish Hatchery, in operation since 1932 and consisting of 195 acres in two parcels along Oak Creek, is owned and administered by the Arizona Game and Fish Department. The hatchery annually produces more than a million trout. Two-inch fish are brought to Page Springs, where they grow to 8-10 inches before being stocked in lakes, ponds and creeks throughout Arizona. Water for the hatchery comes from several springs located near the visitor parking lot. The springs produce a constant flow (15 million gallons a day) of 68-degree water year round, ideal for trout growth. The water is oxygenated and reused through the hatchery and then discharged into Oak Creek. The hatchery is open to the public and is viewed by over 10,000 visitors annually. The site features a visitor center, viewing pond, and walking trails. Nearby, the Bubbling Ponds Important Bird Area includes a 1.6 mile trail along the west side of Oak Creek through outstanding riparian bird habitat. The trail is part of a restoration project sponsored by Northern Arizona Audubon Society in partnership with the Game & Fish Department and Unisource Energy Corporation.

5. Windmill County Park. Windmill County Park is a source of pride in the Cornville community. Dedicated in November 2001, the 4.7-acre park beside Oak Creek is the result of many years of efforts, including State grant support, County assistance, local leadership, and many local citizens who volunteered time, labor and money. The park contains playground equipment, a multipurpose playfield, walking path, basketball hoop, horseshoe and volleyball pits, picnic tables, ramadas, a pond, composting toilets, and an old windmill that really works. There is community interest in expanding the park across Oak Creek on an 80-acre parcel that is currently part of the Coconino National Forest.

6. Private Open Spaces. Ranchlands, pastures, riparian areas, floodplains, and protected green spaces are among open space parcels held in private ownership within the Planning Area. In Oak Creek Valley, 40 acres are protected, including a park, trail system and greenbelt areas. The Verde Santa Fe golf course and two RV Resorts along Oak Creek in Page Springs are other examples of developed open spaces. Raising animals of all kinds is an activity enjoyed by area youth, many of whom are active in 4-H and Future Farmers of America (FFA) programs. A private equestrian facility has been a popular “gymkhana” rodeo site for horseback riding enthusiasts. Other private properties offer similar outdoor recreation opportunities.

7. Dark Skies. The residents of the planning area have identified dark night skies as a treasured value. Yavapai County has a progressive outdoor lighting ordinance that seeks to preserve the beauty of the nighttime skies while allowing for lighting that is adequate for commerce and safety.

8. Invasive Plants. The rural nature of the Cornville Planning Area results in a high potential for the spread of invasive plants. Examples of invasive plants in the area are yellow star thistle, musk thistle, tamarisk, dalmatian toadflax, tree of heaven, and bull thistle. The Forest Service has completed an environmental analysis in response to the threat of noxious weeds in Yavapai and other counties that recommends control, prevention, and eradication of invasive species.

9. Unauthorized Use & Illegal Dumping. Unauthorized camping and use, irresponsible off-road vehicle use, littering, and illegal dumping of household items, old vehicles, construction and landscape materials and vegetative waste are examples of frequent abuses of public lands in the planning area. There is a lack of enforcement capability within the Forest Service and State Land Department to keep up with the problems. However, some management actions and cooperative cleanup efforts have been successful. The lack of a nearby waste facility, high dump fees, handy proximity of public lands, and a lack of understanding about public land restrictions are factors that contribute to the issue. A new organization, Stewards of Public Lands, is being organized to tackle cleanup projects, with support from law enforcement agencies, to bring about changes in attitudes and actions and to help ensure long-term success.

B. Issues

- Protecting scenic vistas
- Protecting dark skies
- Maintaining open space between communities
- Preventing illegal occupancy, uses, dumping and littering
- Increasing law enforcement
- Resolving public/private interface conflicts
- Expanding Windmill Park
- Acquiring additional public access to Oak Creek
- Losing open space through potential sales or exchanges
- Zoning of Federal and State lands

C. Goals & Objectives

As stated in the *Yavapai County General Plan, April 2003*, p. 59-60, maintaining the desired spaciousness within and around communities requires identification, better community planning (e.g. clustered development), preservation and sound management of undeveloped land with respect for private property rights and public purposes. The first three goals are general County-wide goals; the subsequent goals are specific to the Cornville Planning Area.

Goal 1: Enhance parks, recreational opportunities.

- a. Develop an open space master plan identifying geographic features and natural resources to be protected; recreational facilities, preserved open space; wildlife

habitat/corridors; and future regional needs.

- b. Strive to reserve desirable public lands for recreation, open space protection of wildlife habitats and buffering of residential areas.
- c. Encourage parks at regional and local levels favoring natural recreational venues.

Goal 2: Plan for interconnected greenways and trails.

- a. Use greenbelts to separate communities and preserve their identities.
- b. Preserve existing trails for differentiated uses, e.g. motorized and non-motorized.
- c. Connect open spaces with wildlife corridors and pronghorn grassland habitats; set aside prime wildlife viewing areas.
- d. Protect riparian areas, watercourses and associated floodplains.

Goal 3: Preserve open space character.

- a. Protect scenic views, mountain vistas; require development to adapt sensitively to natural areas, protect wildlife habitats.
- b. Retain agricultural uses encouraging continued agribusiness, e.g. ranches, farms.
- c. Maintain clean air by mitigating sources of pollution, e.g. traffic congestion, open burning, heavily-traveled unpaved roads.

Goal 4: Proactively seek opportunities to preserve open space.

- a. Explore all opportunities. (For example, learn status of SB 1184 National Forest Service System Community Purpose Act, sponsored by Arizona Senator Jon Kyl).
- b. Identify potential open space parcels for Verde Valley Open Space Planning Council, which is working on a regional open space plan.
- d. Work with Verde Valley Land Preservation Institute to identify parcels, seek funding, and acquire open space parcels.
- e. Encourage development of conservation easements and/or Purchase of Development Rights Program.
- f. Support a program to increase the use of County taxes to acquire open space.

Goal 5: Work with Yavapai County to acquire 80 Acres of National Forest next to Windmill Park for park expansion and other public purposes.

- a. Explore all possible options, e.g. use permit, exchange, purchase, special legislation.
- b. Develop a proposal; seek political support; acquire funding.

Goal 6: Actively participate in all decision-making relating to the 10 square miles of State Trust Lands bisected by State Route 89A.

- a. Develop and maintain communications with State Land Department and affected communities.
- b. Provide information and encourage public involvement for State Trust Land reform proposals.
- c. Work with the State on cleanup projects.

Goal 7: Protect dark skies

- a. Ensure enforcement of County ordinance.
- b. Provide information to residents on how to limit light pollution.
- c. Keep lights from encroaching over the high ridges surrounding Cornville.

Goal 8: Develop and maintain working relationships with neighboring communities and the Forest Service

- a. Build good neighbor relationship to better manage residential/forest interface areas.
- b. Work on cleanup projects
- c. Explore opportunities for additional waste transfer services.
- d. Report illegal activities
- e. Encourage participation in Friends of the Forest and Stewards of Public Lands.
- f. Hold annual or semi-annual meetings of Association and Forest Service representatives
- g. Coordinate with other Verde Valley communities on issues of mutual concern.

D. Implementation Policies & Strategies

Implementation of open space goals and objectives can only be accomplished through constant vigilance to keep up with the many interests and activities relating to open space preservation. In cooperation with Yavapai County, the Community Association is affiliated with regional planners, Verde Valley Forum, Verde Valley Land Preservation Institute and Stewards of Public Lands. More regular communication and improved cooperation with the Forest Service and Arizona State Land Department are viewed as positive steps to learn more about natural resource issues, work together to resolve issues, and protect the open space values that are indispensable to the quality of life in the Planning Area.