

# Wilderness

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"We believe that the will of the people has been heard," said County Commissioner Leticia Duarte-Benavidez.

Las Cruces Mayor Pro Tem Sharon Thomas said future planning for the city growth over the next 40 years does not require more land than is what is already available for development, which she added is limited by access to utilities and water.

As for the areas proposed in the current legislation, Thomas said she believes it strikes "an appropriate balance" that will still allow many of the current uses of the federal land, which is controlled by the Bureau of Land Management.

Mesilla Mayor Michael Cadena also cited the legislation's compromises. Wilderness areas in the bill amount to 48,900 acres less than what was originally recommended in what is called "The Citizens Proposal" and adds 32,750 acres that would fall under a NCA classification, which is considered less restrictive than wilderness.

The second panel consisted of representatives from the groups that called for the field hearings.

Gary Esslinger, manager of Elephant Butte Irrigation District, said he is concerned that wilder-

ness designations along mountain ranges could limit storm water control efforts for events such as the floods of 2006 and 2008 north and south of Las Cruces.

"Flood control is not a static process," said Esslinger, who added that climate change is making flood control more difficult.

John Hummer, speaking for the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce, said the group's main concern is the proposed wilderness area near the U.S.-Mexico border - 143,450 acres in the Potrillo Mountains.

If the bill is passed, it would also release 16,350 acres now held as a Wilderness Study Area directly along the southern U.S.-Mexico border to provide law enforcement more unhindered access.

Hummer said that buffer isn't adequate, and those who smuggle drugs and people see wilderness areas as places they can more easily cross. The chamber's position is to have the Potrillos be a NCA instead, which would allow greater flexibility for Border Patrol. Hummer noted smuggling problems at other wilderness areas along the border. He said the chamber is not asking for the areas to be open to development. Nor should they provide an opportunity for a "new flow of illegal activity," he said. "So, why risk it? That's the question we're putting forth," Hummer said.

Tom Cooper, a rancher and member of the People for Preserving Our Western Heritage group that opposes the wilderness legislation, said much of the federal rules for grazing on wilderness is based on "high country" ranching, which can handle infrequent access. But desert ranching requires daily care and access, he said. Also, overlapping ranching operations in differently designated areas would become a "bureaucratic nightmare," Cooper said.

Frank DuBois, a former state agriculture department secretary, said he believes that the wilderness "gold standard" doesn't fit with the modern West, in which access to public lands provides many uses.

"A new land use designation is needed that provides protection with public access," he said.

## Some concerns answered

U.S. Rep. Harry Teague, who also attended the hearing, said he shared some of the concerns voiced about the legislation.

Teague said he wanted to know how the proposal would bring economic benefits and affect hunting and fishing.

"How would a wilderness designation affect the future development of infrastructure to serve the public safety and economy of

Doña Ana? Also, I believe that we as a nation must establish and maintain operational control of our borders," Teague said. "We must be able to stop the illegal smuggling of drugs, guns and people. So how would a wilderness designation affect the ability of the Border Patrol to do its job and protect our borders?"

Teague acknowledged that the Organ Mountains and open spaces help define the area's character.

"In many ways, the Organs and the open spaces of Doña Ana County are the goose that lays the golden economic egg," Teague said. "I think we'd better tend carefully to that goose. Let's remember that our open spaces are public lands. They belong to the people of this county and the people of this country. I do have questions about the wilderness proposal. That's just part of the process."

John Muñoz, speaking as a business manager active in the Hispano Chamber of Commerce de Las Cruces, which supports the wilderness bill, said the new generation of retirees and younger workers are attracted to places that have great natural scenery. That's the economic draw of wilderness protection, he said.

Jim Bates, who is active in

many wildlife groups, said his involvement with the process has led him to support the legislation because of all the compromises made so far. Bates said he knows not every hunter and sportsman is on board, but he feels that the negotiations have been held in good faith and the concerns are not defined enough to derail the legislation.

Nathan Small of the New Mexico Wilderness Alliance, which formed the coalition that came up with the original "Citizens Proposal," said wilderness advocates did not get everything they wanted in the bill that was introduced late last year.

"As conservationists, we know we're not going to get everything we ask for," Small said.

As for the border security concerns, Small said even if the bill isn't passed, those concerns would remain because of the area's current restrictions under temporary wilderness status. For all the examples of problems with grazing on wilderness, Small said there are other examples where ranching and wilderness can coexist.

After the hearing, Udall said Bingaman's staff will work to see if adjustments can be made to the legislation "where appropriate" to assuage some concerns. Bingaman said he found the field hearing valuable to the process of shaping the legislation.

# Mesilla

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Cadena countered that he voluntarily took a 50-percent pay cut in his pay because of the town's budget crisis. He said he has been consistent in his resistance to efforts to overly commercialize the town for which its history and ambiance are the main tourist draws. He cited efforts to seek zone variances that he opposed.

"Once you change the zoning for one person, it goes on and on, so you have to be consistent," he said.

But with the town government's dependence on GRT, Barraza said the town's business owners need to be heard.

"I think it's important to listen to these business owners because they account for 76 percent of the town's revenues," she said.

Residents also need to be heard and brought closer, Nelson said. With the town's recent annexing of areas to the north, residents of Raasaf Hills don't feel like they're accepted by Mesilla residents living in "the core." Nelson suggested holding a series of potlucks to bring people from the different areas face to face.

"We're going to get to know each other," Nelson said.

Barraza said she would put emphasize the lives of the town's older residents, who are knowledgeable about the area's rich history.

Yes, the town's history should be emphasized, Cadena said, but Mesilla needs to put its location in more of a regional context, taking advantage of opportunities being provided

by Las Cruces' new convention center and the possibility of wilderness designations protecting the surround landscape. Also, the town needs to make efforts to lure local shoppers as much as the road tourist, he said.

Working with other local governments and agencies is something the town needs to do more of, Barraza said. Also, Barraza said she would work to find a way to bring a small grocery store to Mesilla so residents don't have travel out of town to shop for food.

All these are good ideas, Nelson said, but they won't happen unless Mesilla comes up with a sound, diverse business plan.

"We have all our eggs in the tourist basket, and we know what that can do to us," Nelson said.

Nelson noted that a business owner described Mesilla as "a jewel in the dust." More needs to be done to "polish this jewel, and it will sparkle," she said.

## Trustee candidates

Candidates for the two at-large trustee positions reflect the town's diverse population. Attending the forum was Chris Alexander, who runs a successful roadside chile business; Carolyn Dixon, a longtime resident; Kathleen Foreman, who owns a café near the plaza; Dennis Burn of the construction family; and Linda Flores, an attorney who ran for judge a couple of years ago. Absent from the forum was incumbent Trustee Jesus Caro.

Alexander cited his experience serving on a number of

town committees and boards. Dixon said she would use her accounting experience to get a handle on the town's finances. Foreman said she would bring a business voice to the trustee board. Burn said he would focus on infrastructure deficiencies in the town. Flores emphasized her critical thinking skills and willingness to listen to people.

Several of the candidates criticized the town's website as a poor portal for attracting tourists. Foreman said the town isn't being as creative as it could be to attract tourism.

As for the town's budget woes, Alexander said Mesilla's property taxes need to be reformed, but Flores said the town's share of property taxes is actually very small after the state and county get their shares.

Alexander and Foreman were critical of the town's cluster-development restriction that only allows a farm owner to subdivide a small portion of his property. Foreman said the ordinance flies in the face of property rights, and Alexander said it simply made some families sell out to the rich who have built "country clubs" enclosed by farmland.

Flores said she would stick to the controls in place because they have worked to preserve the town's "core" to its historical and cultural roots. "Variances degrade the plan," she said.

Burn said the focus should not be on limiting growth, but to ensure that what is allowed is quality growth. Foreman said many of the town's restrictions simply make it difficult for businesses to run their operations and attract customers.



**Dr. Beth Vesco-Mock, Animal Services Center of the Mesilla Valley director, talks about one of the older dogs available for adoption Tuesday, Feb. 16. In May, she will have been the center's director for two years and has made some progress in the pet overpopulation problem. "But we still have a long way to go," she said.**

TODD DICKSON  
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# Shelter

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Adoptions also are now being handled differently. Through the center's Foster to Adopt program, the future pet first gets to visit the new home before they are eventually taken home. It's not just for the sake of compatibility.

Being taken or left at the center is stressful to the animals, and along with the possibility of catching diseases from other animals at the center, Vesco-Mock said there is a high probability of an animal getting ill in those first days. Should the animal die after considerable expense to the owner, it leaves a "bad taste" with the owner about the center, "and I don't blame them for feeling that way," she said.

Since she began the Foster to Adopt program in November 2009, 500 animals have been adopted with only three animals dying after adoption. "I think that's pretty good," Vesco-Mock said.

Overall, the average euthanasia rate has gone from 67 percent

in 2008 to 62 percent in 2009. "That's still high, but it is going down," she said.

When she was first hired, Vesco-Mock said her goal was to have the center become a "no kill" shelter in five to seven years.

"We're not going to be able to make that," she said. "It's going to take a generational change."

In the 20 years before, the shelter handled an estimated 285,000 animals, with 211,000 euthanized. "This decade is going to be different," Vesco-Mock said.

Besides the outreach to schools, there have been regular media reports and the city Public Information Office has made a documentary called "Home or Heaven" that will be shown on the city's cable station and will be debuted in a free public screening at 6:30 p.m. Wednesday, March 3, at the Rio Grande Theatre.

The goal is to get people to take responsibility. Vesco-Mock said she wants to create an environment of adult "peer pressure" for neighbors and relatives to point out irresponsible care by owners.