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Bill Mattiace: Protect our two symbols, now

By Bill Mattiace / For the Sun-News

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Las Cruces— In 1968, I fell in love with Las Cruces. Flat out, head over heels, in love. Moving from the East Coast to the rugged terrain of the Southwest I was stunned by the beauty of the Mesilla Valley. The Organs to the east of us, cutting the sky above the desert and forming our backdrop, are nothing short of breathtaking. They are the landmark of our region and the most noticeable symbol of our city.

In 2007, recognizing the importance of this symbol, and because there was as yet no law to protect the Organs, I urged our County Commission to enact a moratorium on all development east of Weisner Road, from north to south. This move would have effectively ensured our Organs stayed clear of multi-million-dollar homes, strip malls, everything.

Yet, for some reason, this course was never pursued, and so we now find ourselves battling each other over what each of us thinks is the right course of action. Business leaders are at odds with each other, as are the leaders of our community. And now we even have anonymous donors funding ad campaigns in our city to try to influence our opinions.

But none of this is necessary. The Organs can be protected at the next County Commission meeting with a simple vote.

This step would also put to rest many of the most controversial points of the wilderness bill currently

being considered by the U.S. Senate. Chief among these are the potential border security problems and risks the Chamber of Commerce has brought up, and

the lost access to public lands that others are concerned about.

For me, though, what's at stake is another symbol of our region. What's at stake is a way of life that stretches back three centuries. Ranching in this part of the country has a long and notable history. In the book, "Tularosa: Last of the Frontier West," the author chronicles the decades of struggle that ranchers faced in our area. And these stories, filled with suspense, danger and heroism, aren't tales from some faraway land, but actual events that happened in these very hills and mountains surrounding us.

And these events still happen today. The ranchers along the U.S.-Mexico border, the ones who will most likely be put out of business if the wilderness bill is passed, are throwbacks to a time gone by. They are the stuff of movies and legends, of books and stories. They still get up every day and work until the sun goes down in one of the toughest businesses you can imagine. They aren't rich elitists; they are stewards of the land, caring for their ranches as very few people care for the environment - intimately and passionately. They aren't outsiders who've moved here to build a million-dollar house and then demand that the desert not be built on. They have lived here for generations and have seen Las Cruces turn from dusty stage stop to the city it is today.

And my fear is that they will be gone in just a few years. While the wilderness bill is lauded as protecting the Organ Mountains it also converts hundreds of thousands of acres to the south and

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west of us into a wilderness area. This change is pretty significant for the ranchers who work that land. Because they won't be able to operate motorized vehicles in the wilderness area they won't be able to maintain fences, wells or other important pieces of equipment they depend on. New grazing rules will limit their access to the ranges their cattle depend on to survive throughout the year.

To some, it matters little that these ranchers might go away. And in truth most of us wouldn't even notice. Not at first anyway. Yet as the traditions of our region leave us one by one - the ranching, the farming - our identity, built over 300 years, also changes. Our green valley is gone, replaced by housing developments. We pay more for our food as more and more of it gets imported. Our desert remains unspoiled - meaning no development and no vehicles (even including bicycles) - yet all of the things that defined us, the reasons we moved here, are suddenly gone.

But this doesn't have to happen. We don't have to see these ranches vanish into history, only to be remembered in textbooks and movies. In one month we can protect the Organ Mountains from any development without more time, money and energy wasted in fighting each other about it. And we can do it while also protecting our way of life here. And as to the desert areas also slated for wilderness designation? They're already protected. Their current designation excludes them from development anyway.

So let's protect the Organs now. Join me in urging our County Commission to make development off limits in the Organs. Let's heal our community by putting this fight behind us, and keep the very symbols of our region - the Organ Mountains and the ranching culture - pristine for the next 100 years.

Bill Mattiace is the former mayor of Las Cruces and currently is the vice president of Governmental Affairs for the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce.

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