

City of Scottsdale's Desert Discovery Center Project

Historical Timeline Highlights [including Narrative in brackets by City Preservation Director, Kroy Ekblaw]

- 1986 – Scottsdale City Council approves 23-acre museum site and Pinnacle Peak Park; a privately-funded Conceptual Site Plan and Programming Study is also completed.
[In the mid 1980's Pinnacle Peak Partners Land developer Jerry Nelson and his wife Florence envisioned a Desert Interpretive Center which would tell the story of the plants and animals of the upper Sonoran Desert and done in a state-of-the-art interactive and visitor-friendly way. The site they had in mind was at Pinnacle Peak which could complement their nearby Troon and Troon North developments. The Nelson's retained local planner Betty Drake to manage the consultant team of Rhodes/Dahl of Monterey, California to do a programming study for the site at the base of Pinnacle Peak. This collaborative effort resulted in the Desert Discovery Museum & Pinnacle Peak Park study which was completed in 1986.]
- 1988 – City hires ERA & Associates, using bed tax funds, to produce a Destination Attraction Study evaluating the feasibility (from a tourism perspective) of a desert center attraction. (amount unknown)
[The city-sponsored Destination Attraction Study prepared by Economics Research Associates (ERA), San Francisco, CA 1988, proposed a "Hostile Environment" (working title) as a specialized attraction providing close-up views of the living creatures of the desert.]
- 1991 – City approves rezoning of 801 acres of State Land as part of a master residential development on the east and west side of Thompson Peak Pkwy north of Bell. 383 of those acres are now part of the Preserve Gateway site purchased from Toll Bros. Mixed zoning R1-10 ESL, R1-18 ESL, R1-7 ESL, C-O . Case 24-Z-91 and Ordinance 2398.
- 1993 – Mayor Herb Drinkwater and Council appoint McDowell Mountain Task Force to begin implementation of Preserve; the September 1993 Task Force Report cited uses that may be in the Preserve including *"ramadas, picnic areas, nature trails, visitor centers, interpretive or educational centers, restrooms, park ranger offices, limited museum facilities and ancillary uses such as parking."*
- 1994 - City creates McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission and establishes initial Preserve area (RSB) of the McDowell Mountains (16,400 acres). The northern and southern access areas were reduced due to concern over cost of the highly developable land. The Gateway proposed site does not get reduced.
- 1995 - 1st public vote authorizes .20% sales tax for the Preserve to purchase land only, cash pay as you go.
- 1995 – McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission begins drafting the Preserve Access Area Report; in the Report approved by the Commission on March 4, 1999 and the Council October 11, 2011, the Gateway is identified as the location for the broadest range of public amenities within the Preserve including potentially *"a transit stop, picnic areas, ramadas, a visitor center, displays, an amphitheater, Preserve offices, restrooms, drinking fountains, telephones, concessions, maps/signage, displays (sic), trailheads, ADA trails and a Preserve gate. Picnic and ramada areas may be provided to accommodate corporate picnics and other large user groups."* The Gateway Access Area is identified as 100-200 acres in size.
- 1996 – City retains Langdon Wilson to prepare a bed tax-funded concept study for a Desert Discovery Center (DDC) at the Gateway, which is the location selected by City staff after a thorough analysis of three sites: the final report presented in 1999 states it is to be *"a place that is exciting, fun, educational, welcoming and accessible, a center of activity and which is a gateway to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve;"* the Report's suggested amenities include a café, shop, and evening hours. (\$120,000 not including change orders) The location was the first 160-acre private purchase with Preserve tax dollars.
[No action was taken on the Desert Discover Center (DDC) concept until 1996 when the city's Tourism Development Program took interest in the project at the time. In 1997 staff did preliminary research and site analysis for the project and found that due to site constraints the Pinnacle Peak site might not be the best location

for the proposed DDC facility.]

- 1996 – City appointed the Desert Preservation Task Force to study preserving lands in northern Scottsdale. On April 1st, 1997 the Council accepted the Task Force recommendation to expand the RSB by an additional 19,940 acres including adding land to the now Tom’s Thumb and Lost Dog access areas.
- 1997 – The City Council Action Report of April 14, 1997, authorizing the agreement with Langdon Wilson for Desert Discovery Center Planning stated: *“The residents of Scottsdale will benefit from the project through the addition of a major attraction designed to both entertain and educate visitors and residents about the uniqueness and value of the Upper Sonoran Desert. By adding a new visitor attraction, the residents will benefit from additional taxes and other economic contributions by the visitor to Scottsdale.”* The Council Report also recommended the Gateway site in the Preserve as the DDC location and the subject of all *“analytical and planning work.”*
[Subsequently, in 1997, the city retained Langdon Wilson, Architects from Phoenix, Arizona and Museum Management Consultants, Inc. San Francisco, California to prepare a preliminary feasibility study and concept plan for the DDC at the Gateway. The study was complete in September, 1999. A set of 11 criteria were used to evaluate and prioritize three possible sites and concluded that the Gateway site be the focus of future analysis and planning as the preferred site for the DDC. The report also developed mission and vision statements, identified potential use and provided operative assumptions, facilities and programs, organizational structure, cost estimates, a three year operating budget and a fundraising study.]
- 1998 – City establishes Desert Discovery Center advisory committee.
- 2000 – City Council adopts the Preserve Ordinance, allowing amenities to be built in the Preserve, as well as uses and activities for education, recreation, research, tourism and activities that serve or further a legitimate public, civic or educational purpose. The ordinance is part of the City’s Revised Code, Chapter 21.
- 2003 – City authorizes negotiations with Toll Brothers to purchase Gateway parcel, stating in the June 18, 2002 Council Report that the Gateway will serve *“as a major passive recreational and tourist experience, a major staging area for exploration of the Preserve and a focal point for educational activities and programs...”* The Report also said that, *“The Gateway is the area where the proposed desert discovery (center) would be located.”* Toll Brothers purchased the entire 800 acres from the State Land Dept. for \$66 million.
- 2004 – Public vote authorizes .15% sales tax for the Preserve that could also be used for Preserve amenities.

[There was renewed interest in the DDC project in 2004 when a group of private citizens formed the Desert Discovery Center Committee. This private committee coordinated their effort with the City design of the Gateway trailhead building and site.]
- 2005 – The McDowell Sonoran Preserve Access Area Design and Site Standards states the Gateway amenities could include *“potentially a Desert Discovery Center,”* and *“...there will need to be flexibility to accommodate the unique functions of and to achieve the specific community objectives for this access area.”*
- 2005 – City approves contract with Weddle Gilmore to conduct a Master Plan for the Gateway, including the DDC at the Gateway as part of the Master Plan. [In 2005, the city approved a contract with Weddle Gilmore to begin the master planning process for the Gateway trailhead site including the DDC.]
- 2006 – City retains Nichols Tourism Group and Weddle Gilmore Architects to update (with bed tax dollars) the 1999 Desert Discovery Center Study; both the RFP and final report identify the DDC at the Gateway. (\$53,000 not including change orders)
[In 2005 the City retained the services of the Nichols Tourism Group and Weddle Gilmore Architects to assist

the private committee to review the concepts developed in the 1999 study and to validate key assumptions, funded by bed tax dollars. The consultant update and refinement report was completed in 2006. The city's Financial Services Department augmented this study with a DDC Business Plan that provided assumptions on how the facility could function and estimated costs. This Business Plan also recommended that before going further with the DDC concept a comprehensive market analysis should be conducted. This recommendation was accepted by the City Council at a work study session on January 23, 2007. The City Council directed staff to work with a task force comprised of TDC and MSPC members to prepare a scope of work for what was to become the DDC Phase I study. The City Council authorized funding and initiated the Phase I consultant selection process on June 16, 2007.]

- 2006 –The MSPC and the Parks and Recreation Commission hold a joint meeting to review the conceptual plan for the Gateway access area.
- 2006 – **The McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission subcommittees reach consensus: “The mission statement for the Desert Discovery Center and the vision for the Preserve are consistent and compatible with each other.”**
- 2007 – Mayor Mancoss’ March 1st State of the City address states: *“Work also continues on plans for a Desert Discovery Center, an exciting private/public partnership, at the main access to the Preserve. This facility needs to be built! It is a key element of the Scottsdale Visitors Bureau’s strategic plan with the goal of expanding tourism. Tonight I propose that funds to support the DDC be included in a 2008 bond election. This educational center will make the Preserve more tangible, more accessible, and more exciting for everyone. It will become a top draw for both residents and tourists.”* (Also mentioned in the 2008 address)
- 2007 - September 18 Council approves Municipal Use Master Site Plan on 543 acres for "Preserve access and Interpretive Center," establishing the DDC use at the Gateway in the Preserve. According to the project narrative: ***"The Phase 2 for the Desert Discovery Center will include an interpretive center, support offices, café with outdoor dining terrace, and a 400 seat outdoor amphitheater."*** The Policy Implications Section of the Council Report states: ***"This facility is in support of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve as established through previously approved actions, including public votes, that have established the location, financing and planning of the Preserve and the ancillary functions intended to be provided in it."*** 10-UP-2006 (6 years after the adoptions of the Preserve Ordinance)

Once a final site plan for the DDC is designed, the MUMSP will require an amendment by Council action through the City's required public hearing process. The current zoning of the land at the Gateway for the proposed DDC is residential, R1-10 and allows municipal uses such as existing trailhead buildings, parking lots, and the DDC. No rezoning is needed.

[In 2005, the city approved a contract with Weddle Gilmore to begin the master planning process for the Gateway trailhead site including the DDC. On September 18, 2007, the City Council approved a Municipal Use Master Site Plan (MUMSP) for the Gateway Access Area to the Preserve (10-UP-2006) on 543 acres of land (160 acres privately purchased, 383 acres purchased later from Toll Bros.). The narrative for the proposal identified the trailhead building/restrooms/storage, parking lot, trails and amphitheater as part of the Phase 1 improvements and the Desert Discovery Center interpretive center, support offices, café with outdoor dining terrace and a 400 seat outdoor amphitheater as Phase 2. According to the Council Action Report for this MUMSP approval, the DDC is a major component of the “approved site plan for a large access and interpretive center as part of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve.” The Policy Implications Section of the Council Report states: "This facility is in support of the McDowell Sonoran Preserve as established through previously approved actions, including public votes, that have established the location, financing and planning of the Preserve and the ancillary functions intended to be provided in it."]

- 2007 – City Financial Services Department conducts a Business Plan Refinement for the DDC.
- 2008 – City retains ConsultEcon, Inc. to evaluate the interpretive and market opportunities for the DDC (funded ½ by bed tax and ½ by the private sector). The November 6, 2007 Council Report authorizing the ConsultEcon study stated *“Positioned in the Gateway to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve east of Thompson Peak Parkway between Bell and Union Hills Roads, the Desert Discovery Center (DDC) was envisioned as a key recreational and educational experience as well as a destination for tourists/visitors to the Valley.”* (\$81,500) [The DDC Phase I study was prepared by ConsultEcon, Inc. in association with Exhibit Design Associates. This study analyzed the potential viability of the project, included extensive public outreach and identified possible program concepts and themes and the desired size and scope. Once again the Gateway site was analyzed and recommended as the optimum location for the DDC facility. Phase I of the Desert Discovery Center (DDC) Feasibility study was completed in June 2008, funded ½ from bed tax and ½ by the private sector. On August 12, 2008 a joint meeting of the Tourism Development Commission (TDC) and the McDowell Sonoran Preserve Commission (MSPC) was held. The overall reaction to the consultant’s work and process followed to complete Phase I was favorable. There was general acceptance of the Phase I study as a good foundation with solid concepts, ideas and recommendations for the next phase of the project.]

[During this time there was a private-sector Desert Discovery Center Planning Committee led by Tom Silverman. It was disbanded in February 2009. Mr. Silverman proposed that the city once again lead the DDC planning effort. The Mayor, City Manager and Chairmen of the TDC and MSPC agreed with the proposal and supported the creation of the DDC Joint Subcommittee made up of four members, two each from the TDC and MSPC.]

- 2008 - A jury resolves the issue with Toll Brothers and the City pays \$81.9 million (\$214,000/acre not including legal fees) for the 383-acre Gateway/DDC site.
- 2009 – The Gateway to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve opens, with infrastructure planned and in place to accommodate the DDC, as part of the Gateway master plan design. City Resolution No. 8079 creates CIP project “Desert Discovery Center” (Oct 6, 2009). (Building, parking lot, dev. costs - \$4 million) [Phase 1 improvements would be built and opening in May of 2009.]

[Based on direction from the City Council, TDC and MSPC a second and more detailed analysis phase was to be pursued. The second phase of the analysis of the DDC was based on a consensus that the DDC would be a larger destination attraction facility and located on the site adjacent to the Gateway public access as conceptually shown on the approved Municipal Use Master Site Plan for the Gateway trailhead facility. A four-member subcommittee was formed that included two members from the TDC and two members from the MSPC. On October 9, 2009, the City Council approved the creation of a new capital project “Desert Discovery Center” and authorized funding for the Phase II Feasibility Study, funded by Preserve tax dollars. Subsequently, The DDC Phase II Design/Feasibility Study contract was awarded by the City Council on January 26, 2010 to the consultant team headed by Swaback Partners PLLC.]

- 2010 – City retains Swaback Partners for the Preserve tax-funded Desert Discovery Center Feasibility Study: Phase II; the RFP identifies the Gateway location and describes the project as a “larger, destination, attraction-type facility.” The January 26, 2010 Council Action Report for the awarding of the Swaback contract reiterated the consensus of the Joint MSPC/TDC Subcommittee: *“Subcommittee members further agreed and recommended that Phase Two should focus on the development of a single concept to be located at the Gateway to the McDowell Sonoran Preserve, one that matches the magnificence of the Preserve and will draw visitors to Scottsdale.”* (<\$500,000 not including change orders)

[The conceptual design and exhibits were presented to the City Council on June 15, 2010. After that June City Council meeting, the focus of the study moved to the operating cost estimates and the business and marketing plan. The draft information was provided to the DDC Subcommittee for review during their weekly meetings.

On August 19, 2010, a TDC/MSPC joint meeting was held to review the draft DDC Phase II Feasibility Study. The Commission members were able to ask questions and provide additional information to the consultants. In addition, two Open House meetings were held on July 13, 2010 and September 9, 2010 to provide the public with the opportunity to view the DDC comments and provide feedback. The consultants used the comments received by all groups to further refine the feasibility study.

The report evaluated the feasibility of the proposed DDC located at the Gateway within the McDowell Sonoran Preserve. Based on the location and design concepts presented, the general conclusion of the DDC Phase II Feasibility Study was that the DDC is a viable project with a high level of interest and support from potential users.

In addition to the consultant's study, the Subcommittee developed a DDC Work Program for the continuation of the project. The DDC Subcommittee key Work Program Initiatives are listed below.

1. Conduct a feasibility study to assess private funding capacity.
2. Request that the City Manager make available select city staff members to assist with identifying public/private funding options with advisory input from Boards and Commissions.
3. Establish a Phase III Committee to:
 - a. Recommend funding scenarios for the DDC;
 - b. Refine the Phase II study results, and;
 - c. Review and recommend the preferred business, operating and management model for the DDC.
4. Continue Public Outreach.
5. Consider ordinance amendments to accommodate the DDC on this site (Gateway).

The TDC and MSPC held a joint meeting on September 29, 2010 to review and vote on the DDC Phase II Feasibility Study and Recommendations/Work Program. The TDC voted unanimous approval. The MSPC vote was split 5-5 over concerns regarding the location of the DDC in the Preserve boundary and use of Preserve Tax and MSPC role in the Phase III study.

Due to their split vote the MSPC held another meeting on November 4th, 2010 to review and vote on the DDC Phase II Feasibility Study and Recommendations/Work Program. The MSPC suggested modifications to the work program supported by the TDC and voted to send an alternate proposal to the City Council.

After hearing both options (the TDC and MSPC recommendations) for the DDC Phase II Feasibility Study and the DDC Recommendations and Work Program, on November 9, 2010, the City Council voted to approve Resolution No. 8469 accepting the DDC Phase II Feasibility Study and Recommendations (as recommended by the TDC) to move forward with the project. Bed tax funding was allocated to continue this effort in Phase III to the DDC CIP project.]

- 2010 - November 9- Council accepts the Phase II Report identifying the DDC location at the Gateway.
 - City Resolution No. 8469 authorizes proceeding with the recommendations as accepted and creates CIP project Phase III (Nov 9, 2010)
 - City Resolution No. 8540 establishes the DDC Phase III Feasibility Committee and transfers Bed tax funds to DDC CIP Project (Dec 13, 2010)

[On December 13, 2010 the City Council adopted Resolution No. 8540 establishing the DDC Phase III Feasibility Committee. A five-member committee was appointed based on relevant experience. The committee met regularly from May 2011 to February 2012. After extensive review and analysis, the Phase III Feasibility Committee produced and approved: several Key Findings, a set of Recommendations regarding the four areas listed above and a Work Program to support the continuation of the DDC project. These results were provided to the City Council in a memo dated February 22, 2012.

In general, the committee strongly supported the location, concept and vision of the DDC project as a premier education and tourism facility. They recommended that the DDC should be operated by a non-profit 501 (c) (3) organization. The ultimate success of the DDC will depend upon a highly qualified operator. Funding for the project will come from the public through a Bond and private sources. The city will fund the bulk of the capital cost with private sources funding any additional capital costs, operating and start-up costs. Fundraising will be a key component of the business plan to help cover annual operating costs. The committee recommended a modified business plan which contemplated lower attendance projections, revenues and associated operating

budget. The DDC location was reviewed and analyzed in detail confirming the Gateway location but recommending as a land use option that the DDC site become a separate parcel within the Preserve to allow for the special activities required for the operation of the DDC facility.]

- 2012 – City issues the bed tax-funded Desert Discovery Center Phase III Feasibility Study and Work Plan to test the assumptions from the Phase II plan. City Resolution No. 8998 accepts the Phase III recommendations and work program for moving the project forward. The Summary of the Committee’s Key Findings included that: *“The committee strongly supports the location, concept and vision of the DDC project as a premier education and tourism facility.”* (\$60,000)

[The Phase III Feasibility Committee Work Program included the following actions:

 1. Designate a staff leadership team to keep the DDC project moving forward;
 2. Direct the staff team to initiate the RFP process to select a non-profit 501 (c) (3) operator;
 3. Continue to evaluate funding potential and timing; and
 4. Provide funding for the DDC project efforts for the next 2-3 years from the bed tax.

On March 27, 2012 the City Council held a study session to review the DDC Phase III Feasibility Committee recommendations and on April 3, 2012 the City Council approved Resolution No. 8998 accepting the Phase III Committee Recommendations and Work Program.]
- 2012 - City issues an RFQ for the Desert Discovery Center operations, identifying the location at the Gateway. There were no respondents.
- 2013 – City retains Swaback Partners to test other sites for flexibility in use/activity and/or lower construction costs; after review of six sites for the DDC, the Gateway site was reconfirmed as the best location. (funding and source unknown)

[Specific to the alternative site analysis, at their final meeting on May 1, 2013, the Desert Discovery Center Phase III Committee accepted the DDC Site Location Analysis Report (conducted by Consult Econ and Swaback Partners dated 5/1/2013) and recommended the following:

 1. Gateway location (site #6) is preferred site if DDC is to be located in the Preserve
 2. 94th St. and Bell Road (site #2) and Pima Road and Dynamite Boulevard (site #5) are preferred alternative sites if DDC is not to be located within the Preserve
 3. City of Scottsdale/Staff should continue to seek potential partner(s) and an operator for the DDC]
- 2013 – As suggested by the DDC Phase III Task Force, the Desert Discovery Center Advocates, a group of private citizens, formed in the Summer of 2013 to conduct community outreach, a fundraising feasibility study, explore and develop potential partnerships, and demonstrate the community support for the Desert Discovery Center. The group hired consultants, raised over \$250,000, held hundreds of meetings, garnered a list of over 300 community leaders as advocates, and established an MOU with ASU for this project.
- 2014 – ConsultEcon’s final report reviews the Operating Potential of the Desert Discovery Center and Wallace Gardens at Alternative Sites (funding and source unknown). The intention of the study was to determine if the DDC and the Wallace Gardens Scottsdale (WGS) could co-locate. The report projected attendance and financial results of the DDC and WGS individually or co-located at two sites, the original Gateway site and an alternative site on the northeast corner of Pima Road and Dynamite Boulevard. Note that the latter site is on State trust land (and at the time of the report) not owned by the City of Scottsdale.

The report concluded that locating the DDC alone at the Pima and Dynamite location would reduce mid-range attendance by approximately 11% and reduce mid-range earned revenue by about 12% compared with the attendance and earned revenue projected for the Gateway location. More significantly, the mid-range DDC non-operating revenue required to support financial self-sufficiency at Pima and Dynamite would be approximately 31% higher. The report concluded that co-locating the two facilities at either location would provide a very small increase in mid-range DDC attendance (approximately 2%) and a somewhat larger increase (approximately 12%) in WGS mid-range attendance. Because of the significant difference in scale between the two entities, co-

location was projected to have a more significant positive impact on WGS than on the DDC. With the timing of the DDC uncertain and with concerns about compatibility of some of the WGS plant collection with the native vegetation in the Preserve, the owners of the WGS elected to pursue other options. WGS signed an agreement for the collection to be relocated to the Boyce Thompson Arboretum.

- 2014 – Up to 2015, the City’s website identified the DDC location at the Gateway.
- 2015 – In March the Scottsdale City Council, during a work study, gave unanimous direction to staff to reissue the DDC RFQ. The Desert Discovery Center Scottsdale, Inc. responded with the Scope of Qualifications (SOQ).
- 2015 – In July the Scottsdale City Council approved organization strategic plan priorities including: *B. Provide strategic support of tourism and visitor events 4. Advance Desert Discovery Center though considering concept development contract.*
- 2015 – In September the Council voted to direct staff to negotiate a contract with DDCCS and for the City Treasurer to identify possible funding sources.
- 2016 – On Jan. 11, the Scottsdale City Council voted 6:1 to approve the contract with DDCCS for further planning and study; to issue an RFQ for an architect, and to initiate an amendment to the MUMSP.