

TOWN RESIDENTS STOP PRISON

The San Xavier District of the Tohono O'odham Nation was proposing to locate a detention center in the Santa Cruz River floodplain, east of Rancho Sahuarita Blvd. and north of Pima Mine Road. However, thousands of neighboring residents vehemently opposed this plan and together with local, county, state and federal stake-holders worked with the Nation to move this proposed facility to another location. The decision to abandon plans for the development of a prison within the floodplain of the Santa Cruz River was finalized at a meeting that included San Xavier District representatives, the Tohono O'odham Legislative Council and Chairman Ned Norris, Jr.

A May 15th letter from Pima County to Donna Peterson of the Bureau of Indian Affairs is just one example of the type of criticism leveled against the proposed prison. Pima County Supervisors, Ramon Valadez and Sharon Bronson and County Administrator Chuck Huckleberry, cited "several concerns regarding content as well as elements missing" from the Environmental Assessment for the prison project. One of the most serious problems appeared to be that the proposed site was located in the floodplain, or possibly even the floodway, of the Santa Cruz River. The letter stated:

"Due to the resultant loss of floodwater storage capacity in a major water course upstream of the metropolitan area in the county, development of the site in the manner proposed will most certainly have negative impacts on flood risks within the County. Current floodplain management practices and County and federal policy show that preserving floodplains has beneficial impacts that include reduction of flood risk and damage, preservation of wildlife habitat, and ground water recharge. Environmental and economic sustainability also benefit from avoiding flood plain development."

The County's arguments that the proposed prison would have significant impacts to the "environment, cultural resources, floodplain and other infrastructure" were augmented by a public outcry by concerned citizens like Sahuarita residents, Linda and Dewey Cooper. This couple spearheaded the effort to stop the prison from being built close to homes in Rancho Sahuarita and within the Santa Cruz River floodplain.

Linda and Dewey greatly appreciated the County's help in reviewing the proposed prison location. Linda recently said "The Supervisors' comments about the adverse impacts of this prison to the community, along with their sensitivity to their constituents' concerns, made the difference in this fight." She continued, "I admire the County's continuing efforts to preserve the Santa Cruz River as a natural resource for future generations." According to Dewey, "Thousands of our neighbors joined us in the fight to stop this prison from being constructed at this location in the floodplain of the Santa Cruz River. We sent our elected representatives in Washington petitions with over 2,200 signatures that opposed this prison, and we're delighted that Representative Gabrielle Giffords listened."

Bob Sharpe, the founder of Rancho Sahuarita, has always opposed the detention center and supported the residents' efforts to stop this project. Sharpe said, "The cancellation of the prison is great news for the community." He continued, "However, in light of a prison being proposed within the floodplain of the Santa Cruz, and recent County concerns about plans to develop strip commercial close to the river, we all need to be more sensitive to preserving this critical natural resource."

Over two years ago, Rancho Sahuarita offered to contribute almost 200-acres of open space to enhance the Santa Cruz River in its natural state as a pedestrian-oriented linear park. The new North Santa Cruz Park is now located on a small portion of that property. This environmental vision also included a town wide river-park amenity that would link the south end of the town with its northern boundary, and provide the entire community with thousands of acres of open space and parks to enjoy forever.

Bob Sharpe believes that the community needs to explore alternatives that maintain and enhance the natural functions of the Santa Cruz River and avoid future threats like this recent prison proposal. Sharpe said that, "our goal is to provide sustainable solutions for this environmentally sensitive corridor that would protect the Santa Cruz River in perpetuity." If you would like to learn more about SOS (Save Our Scenic) Santa Cruz (River), call Tom Murphy at 256-6076 or e-mail him at tom@ranchosahuarita.com.