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OPINION

What the Devil won't tell you

25 years of the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan: A relic of a time when we could have nice things

Compromise & trust built the biggest success in Southern Arizona government in the last 3 decades

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TucsonSentinel.com



Supervisor Andres Cano addresses the gathering commemorating the 25th anniversary of the Sonoran Desert

Pima County

A quarter-century ago, a bunch of people who spent years fighting on opposite sides of the growth debate got to work on creating a productive peace.

They came up with the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan

(<https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/tag/sonoran+desert+conservation+plan/>), which turns 25 this year. It was celebrated at an event in front of Pima County's Historic Courthouse last week, and is a ghost of a time when local government could have nice things.

Don't think of the plan as just a document on a shelf or map that regulates development.

Consider it a story of political foes finding one another's humanity just enough to understand victory did not require the defeat of the other person. Success was an independent virtue.

Just take two people.

Carolyn Campbell ([tucsonsentinel.com/tag/carolyn+campbell](https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/tag/carolyn+campbell)) had been a Green Party member and environmental leader. She fought growth as hard as she fought for desert protection.



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Bill Arnold was a key figure in the local "pro-growth" coalition that had run roughshod over environmentalists for years. He sat on the Pima County Planning and Zoning Commission where he proved a reliable vote for property rights.

The plan would become the most daring success story in growth management, anywhere in the country. Results did not come in spite of clashing interests but because of them. Campbell and Arnold used their credibility to create something huge and lasting. They didn't (and pay attention children of the 2020s) use it to destroy a solution because it wasn't good enough.



Had they been one bit less effective fighters for their cause, they would not have been able to convince their respective coalitions that the plan was worth doing and – 25 years later – worth celebrating.

What was such a big deal about the Conservation Plan?

A couple things. On a technical level it used science to guide growth management. Biology would determine which habitats were most worth saving. Funny. No other community had done it that way before.

On a practical level, the conservation plan put an end to the politics of growth that dominated locally for decades.

"All the controversy around the growth issue stopped – it just stopped," Arnold told me in a phone interview.

The bitter debate that had for years defined county politics was so off the table that in 2004, all five county supervisors ran unopposed.

Power to the People

Results did not happen easily.

Technically, the plan was crafted during a series of Saturday-morning meetings of a steering committee at the Arizona Sonora Desert Museum. Progress was slow. Real slow. Glacial.

It started off well enough with all parties getting a crash course in science. But as talks dragged on, not much happened.

"That went on for 3.5 years," Campbell said. "Nobody trusted anybody."

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Arnold remembers one episode (but he can't recall exactly what it was about) where he said he grew frustrated that no decisions were being made. He said he stood up and addressed Campbell: "Carolyn, I don't come to a dance and not dance."

So Campbell and Arnold put together sort of an ad-hoc working group that held separate meetings to hash out the the tougher issues. Also present were David Hogan of the Center for Biological Diversity (<https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/tag/center+for+biological+diversity/>); small-scale developer Michael Zimet, Jonathan DuHamel, a writer and wise-use O.G. and Northwest Side environmentalist Christine McVie (a retired nurse, not the Fleetwood Mac keyboard player).

Having covered growth in the late 1990s, I can not capture how unlikely a group of protagonists these ranks would prove to be.

Nationally, it would be like Christian Nationalists and the Woke Mob negotiating a solution to immigration.

The thing is, this ad-hoc group worked some magic and found solutions the different interests could accept.

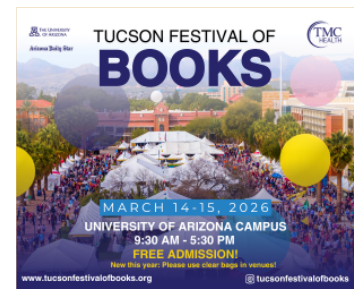
I know, this seems impossible now but then, a bunch of pieces just fell into place to make the plan happen.

Good times at the end of history

The good times were rolling.

The 1990s was about as close to American Greatness as the definition will get. The country was without a global peer threat. The economy was booming. The Internet was a promised land and not yet a hellscape. Jobs were everywhere. Wages were rising. People were fine with brick cell phones so long as they played "Snake." The music was better. The movies were better. The Denver Broncos were winning Super Bowls.

At the time economists were seriously discussing the idea that the world might have seen it's last recession and other academics were writing books called "The End of History. (<https://www.amazon.com/End-History-Last-Man/dp/0743284550>)"



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During those better times, the environment could take center stage because, well, what else was there to worry about? Locally and statewide, protecting the environment gained increasing importance.

Leadership helped and Pima County's was fully aligned on the issue. Support from a long-time desert protector like then-Supervisor Raul Grijalva was expected.

Republican supervisors at the time like Mike Boyd and Ray Carroll (<https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/tag/ray+carroll/>) staked their reputations on better managing it.

"If you believe in a creator, then you should protect the creation. That's the Lord's work," Carroll said in a Carroll-ism for the ages.

It went higher than that, though. Former Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt, a Democrat, and Republican U.S. Rep. Jim Kolbe also fully bought into the plan and worked their Washington magic to set aside the Ironwood Forest National Monument and expand the Las Cienegas National Conservation Area.

Inject three more ingredients. First, supervisors voted down the Canoa Ranch rezoning, the first defeat for the growth lobby in decades. Second, after casting the sole vote for the rezoning, Boyd declared that it was time to look at growth management. Third, and maybe most important, the cactus ferruginous pygmy owl was listed as endangered – and its critical habitat just happened to be the desert areas that developers most prized.

"All of it was a reaction to the Endangered Species Act," Carroll said.

Another 43 other critters were either protected by the Endangered Species Act or about to be and that was a real problem for people who owned property. Building can occur in critical habitat but it requires adding to a mitigation bank. To build on an acre, a property owner would have to buy up to three more acres of critical land and deposit it into the land bank.



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The county would agree to do all of the mitigation banking for all the species, thereby protecting developers from lawsuits. That's why having Hogan at the table was so necessary. He represented the Tucson-based environmental group that did the suing to enforce the Endangered Species Act.

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To set aside that much desert for protection would require a \$160 million bond. Having Arnold's people on the side for the bond would prove critical when it was approved in 2006.

It also helps that words like growth and no-growth were lazy modifiers to describe the different sides of the argument. The environmentalists knew Tucson was going to keep growing. None of them said "shut it down." And it wasn't like developers hated the desert. Crap, they sold the desert as an attraction.

The different sides had just been fighting each other for so long, they approached each other as enemies.

Once they reverse engineered their distrust, growth management became a problem to solve and not a battle to be won.

"It was a process of humanizing the other side," Arnold said.

See how this works, children of the 2020s?

No need to feast on the bones of the enemy.

Keep ranchers ranching

In its totality, the Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan had a lot of moving parts but I'm going to focus on one element to illustrate how everyone can win.

The county spent \$230 million buying these lands and focused on ranches that could be easily converted into red-tile neighborhoods.

The ranch thing proved contentious and a real stumbling block for environmentalists.

"When we started working on it, there were a lot of people who thought cows don't belong in the arid Southwest," Campbell said. "We had some issues with it."



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Look at it though, from a ranchers' perspective. They often struggle to make ends meet but they are sitting on millions of acres of land they could sell to Pulte Homes. They can just say "screw it" and get rich quick.

"Every third generation has had their eyes on that from the day they could count," Carroll said.

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Selling the land to make way for another development like Rocking K Ranch or Continental Ranch would spread the red-tile ocean as Tucson's urban footprint further sprawled.

The bonds paid for buying a bunch of ranches and by compensating the land owners, no property rights were violated. One idea that gained momentum was to buy conservation easements from ranchers. Ranchers would be compensated to keep on ranching. The easements would permanently prevent the development of the land.

In the end, they went another way.

"When push came to shove they all sold outright to the county," Campbell said. "That was a real win for the ranchers."

Ranchers got the money and kept on ranching.

Environmentalists and ranchers were almost genetically disposed to battling one another, even though both loved the environment in different ways. Ranch owners like Pat King and Mac Donaldson helped convince others the plan was worth doing.

The environmentalists had to let that go and when they did, they found a bounty.

A quarter-million acres were taken off the board, protected from sprawl. That land went into a mitigation bank to allow developers to build elsewhere in tens of thousands of acres of endangered species habitat. Enviro's got a heck of a lot more than they gave and developers got the certainty they needed to make a plan work.

A commemoration of the first 25 years of the plan, held last week, drew just a few dozen people. Admittedly, the rodeo parade was probably a more fun bet that morning. And county officials are planning more recognition for the SDCP over the rest of the year. But the impact of this tough-to-wrangle compact should be more widely recalled.

Props, Maeveen

I also can't allow this column to go further without mentioning who Campbell calls the "real hero" of the conservation plan.

Someday we will build the Charles Henry Huckelberry (https://www.tucsonsentinel.com/tag/chuck+huckelberry) County Complex and Taco Stand as a tribute to the former county administrator's extraordinary tenure as the man at the top of Pima government for decades.

He deserves enormous credit for making the plan happen.

His smartest move, though, was naming his deputy Maeveen Behan as the key troubleshooter for the plan.

She was Mr. Spock with a Southern accent. Her office was floor-to-ceiling reports she wrote up about every aspect of growth. Each bound volume was about an inch thick.



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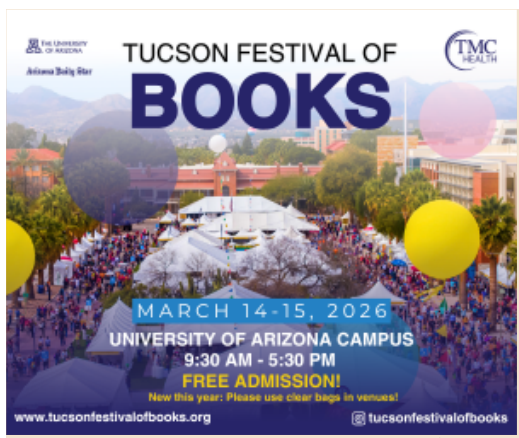


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I tried to read them once and they were so jam-packed with technical information that my eyes crossed. Then I realized I could just call Behan and she would recite them back to me.

Behan did the heavy lift of compiling the data and synthesizing the science to make the plan happen.

Whenever someone seemed to understand the complex topic she was explaining she would lean forward with a bright-eyed, toothy grin. She'd repeat the words "Yeah! Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!" punctuated with a rapid-fire nod. She was just thrilled that she made someone smarter.

And she didn't really have an agenda because her thing was problem-solving. She was instantly likeable and relentlessly credible.

Sadly, colon cancer took Behan in 2009. She died the day the Board of Supervisors voted to name the plan's conservation land system after her.

Props, Maeveen.

And props to Tucson for daring to think big and work together as human beings.

Blake Morlock is an award-winning columnist who worked in daily journalism for more than 25 years and is the former communications director for the Pima County Democratic Party. Now he's telling you what the Devil himself will not.

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