

Palo Parado Bridge May Create Conservation Opportunity

The mesquite bosques that run along the west side of Pendleton Drive in Rio Rico represent some of the best and last examples of this rich riparian (river-associated) community. A recent proposal by Rio Rico Properties (RRP) to rezone land bordering the upcoming bridge approach may allow for better protection of some of this prime habitat.

Mesquite bosques (woodlands dominated by large mesquite trees) only develop in areas with shallow groundwater, which limits their occurrence to the upper terraces of southwest river systems like that of the Santa Cruz. Bosques once flanked the river's course all the way to Tucson, supporting wild turkey, wolves, and grizzly bears.

Over the past two centuries, however, most of our bosques were converted to agricultural lands and more recently, much the remainder has been developed residentially. The bosque that survives near the Palo Parado Bridge site is part of an essential string of excellent wildlife habitat that deserves protection from further fragmentation. This habitat helps make our area a globally-recognized "hot spot" for wildlife, especially birds like the yellow-billed cuckoo, Bell's vireo, gray hawk, and broad-billed hummingbird. It helps draw people from all over the world to visit and live here.

Velvet mesquite trees (our most common species) can be found throughout Santa Cruz County, but when their roots reach reliable water, they grow much larger, with a much denser canopy of branches and leaves, than their hillside siblings. They also enrich the soil beneath them, so encourage the growth of a multi-level plant community that creates many food sources and hiding/nesting places. The combination of dense understory, multiple layers of plant species and an overarching canopy is unique to the bosque (see illustration). It provides an enormous number of "niches" for wildlife. Even a yard of large mesquite trees, if their understory is removed (an unfortunate but common landscaping practice), cannot support a fraction of the wildlife that thrives in the bosque environment.

Currently, the forty-acre area between Pendleton Road and the railroad tracks, flanking what is now Caballero Court, is zoned for residential development. The lots in question are still undeveloped, except for many scraped roadways. Great bosque habitat flourishes near the tracks, but extends at diminishing richness at least 400' towards Pendleton. The CC&Rs ("covenants, conditions and restrictions") attached to the existing lots do protect existing vegetation, but enforcement is solely through a homeowners' organization that is still under RRP control. The bosque could be better protected through a conservation easement or outright donation of the bosque area, which FOSCR research estimated at about 16 acres. RRP has proposed a U-shaped protection zone which covers about 9 acres, although we do not consider all the vegetation within those 9 acres to be the highest-value habitat.

RRP seems open to working with FOSCR to better define and protect the bosque habitat in their proposal. In July, the Planning and Zoning Commission decided to table this proposal for three months, until more information is available on potential traffic and other impacts should the property be rezoned. FOSCR will continue to advocate for the most effective protection possible for this great bosque habitat, wherever the potential exists.