

Tucson Region

## **City panel wants joint conservation effort with county**

By Tony Davis

Tucson planning commissioners want city and county governments to join forces to produce a regional land-saving plan — five years after the two conservation efforts split apart.

The city Planning Commission voted 7-2 Wednesday night to recommend preparing a joint Habitat Conservation Plan, on the grounds that it would save time and taxpayer money.

But Thursday, County Administrator Chuck Huckelberry came out against the idea because the county plan is almost finished.

In 2001, the City Council voted to break away from the county's Sonoran Desert Conservation Plan process, after city officials complained that county officials weren't listening to their views.

County officials have pushed since 2004 for a conservation plan to save nearly 260,000 acres through land purchases and developer donations. They want federal approval of their plan next year.

City officials hope to produce a plan covering 25,000 acres of city land holdings in the Avra Valley by mid-2007. They wish to produce a plan for 75,000 to 85,000 acres of other land south and east of the city's developed areas by 2010.

The city's slow progress is one reason Planning Commissioner Daniel Patterson says he wants a joint plan. While the county has interim land-saving guidelines for development until its plan is approved, the city has none, he said.

"The status quo in the meantime is more and more sprawl," said Patterson, an ecologist for the Center for Biological Diversity. "You're talking about years and years of additional planning and millions of extra dollars that should be spent on other priorities."

He and Commissioner Sami Hamed said recent voter approval of a half-cent sales tax for the \$2.1 billion regional transportation plan shows regional desert preservation can work.

But Commissioner Alan Lurie, one of the two "no" votes Wednesday, said comparing the Sonoran Desert plan to the regional transportation effort is a ridiculous oversimplification of a complex issue.

Leslie Liberti, director of the city's Office of Conservation and Sustainable Development, said the city might not save much time or money if it joins the county plan, in part because much of the land it's working with is state land.

It will take a long time to work out an agreement on that land with the State Land Department, and the county government has excluded state land from its plan, she said.

Tucson's past leadership may not have pushed hard for such a plan, Liberti said, but she said that's changed since Mike Hein became city manager last year.