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Pride in the Desert'

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Plans to create a corporate-sponsored 600-acre desert preserve, a first for Yuma County, may be the one topic business, government and environmental groups agree on.

The only disagreement may be in what to call it — a preserve or a park.

"We hope it goes well. We hope it fosters a sense of respect and pride in the desert. If that happens it may be a good thing," said Daniel Patterson, desert ecologist with the Tucson-based Center for Biological Diversity.

The preserve is proposed to be located north of Foothills Drive, where the pavement ends, on land currently managed by the Bureau of Land Management.

The \$2.5 million preserve would include hiking trails, horse trails, an outdoor amphitheater, nature trails, picnic areas, trails paved to provide for handicap access, an active park with a playground and courts and an area for off-highway vehicle use.

The Yuma County Board of Supervisors on Monday morning got their first look at the master plan for the proposed preserve which must pass BLM muster before the land is transferred to the county.

Patterson said the center takes no position and does not object to the plan but did say the preserve — because of its size and proposed features — should be called a park.

"Give it an honest name and call it a park," Patterson said, adding: "It would be a good thing if it increases awareness for the desert web of life."

Echoing Patterson's comments, Yuma Audubon Society President Carey Meister said: "If they want to make it a park they should call it a park."

Meister said the Audubon Society chapter also takes no position on the planned preserve but raised questions about the impact of development and use of

the land.

"We'd be interested in seeing an environmental assessment from BLM so we can better assess the impact," Meister said.

At issue, however, could be use of off-highway vehicles which Patterson said conflicts with wildlife and those who do not use off-highway vehicles.

That too may be a disagreement over terminology.

Patterson said off-highway vehicle use is "very damaging to wildlife and it's a huge conflict with those who don't use off-highway vehicles ... We'd agree to the name 'preserve' if they kept off-highway vehicles out," Patterson said.

Yuma County Parks Manager Ed Grossenheider told supervisors: "This project has a lot of community support. ... It's a doable project and we're going to get it done."

Since the county does not own or maintain any park land and there is no money in the forthcoming fiscal year budget to pay for parks, money for development and maintaining the preserve would come from grants and corporate sponsors.

Grossenheider said he is speaking with several area corporations about sponsoring portions of the yet-to-be approved preserve but declined to name those corporations.

In exchange for funding, companies would get naming rights to trails and/or be able to post their corporate logos, Grossenheider said.

Grossenheider said he expects to present a measure to supervisors on June 6 seeking their approval to submit the preserve plan to the BLM. The BLM review process is estimated to take about 18 months to complete, he said.

The effort marks the second time in recent years the county has sought land from the federal government for a preserve.

The county in 1999 applied to the BLM for land to create a desert preserve but the BLM in September 2002 rejected the county's application. If approved by the BLM, development of the proposed preserve would be done in phases and could take up to 10 years to complete, Grossenheider has said.