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# Local Opinion: With San Pedro in the balance, local leaders defer

By Robin Silver Special to the Arizona Daily Star

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*The following column is the opinion and analysis of the writer.*

The San Pedro River is the last surviving undammed desert river in the Southwest. It's one of the nation's environmental crown jewels — millions of songbirds stop there on their annual migrations.

The San Pedro is also world-renowned for its biodiversity. Nearly 45% of the 900 bird species in North America rely on the San Pedro River at some point in their lives. It supports one of the richest varieties of mammal species on Earth.

So it's baffling — and deeply troubling — that Cochise County and the cities of Sierra Vista and Benson seem so determined to push the San Pedro to the brink of collapse.

Their uncontrolled deficit groundwater pumping intercepts water that would otherwise provide surface flow to the San Pedro River. And now the proposed Villages at Vigneto in Benson, which would add 28,000 new homes in a sprawling groundwater-dependent development, may well serve as a death knell for this incredible river.

Once this river is gone — a river that has lasted for thousands of years — it can't come back.

Of course, Benson's mayor and vice mayor ignored the facts in their recent op-ed ("Urban elites attempting to dictate what's best for Cochise County," Dec. 6). They also fail to disclose why, on the taxpayers' dime, they are shilling so hard for an out-of-town billionaire developer.

There's every reason to suspect that just out of view is the Washington, D.C., crisis management firm that's been hired to wage a PR war in favor of this Vigneto project. That firm is run by Lanny Davis, who represents Michael Cohen, President Trump's now-imprisoned former personal attorney, as well as having represented Bill Clinton and despotic leaders Laurent Gbagbo of Ivory Coast and Teodoro Mbasogo of Equatorial Guinea.

This whole thing is developing a stink.

That's why the Center for Biological Diversity just filed a public-records request with the city of Benson to get records connecting city officials to the Vigneto developers, Davis' crisis management/PR firm and the shell group they've created to make it appear that there's a groundswell of local support for this destructive development.

Don't forget: The executive director of this so-called "coalition" lives in Washington, D.C., and one of the principals behind Vigneto, Mike Ingram, co-chaired an inaugural fundraiser selling access to President Trump with his sons, Don Jr. and Eric.

It's clear the Vigneto development is in trouble. The Arizona Daily Star has reported serious allegations of interference by political operatives to reverse a federal decision against the development. This interference is now the target of a congressional investigation.

Making matters worse is that these kinds of development projects have placed the area's major economic engine, Fort Huachuca, at extreme risk. Because Sierra Vista and Cochise County have refused to adequately help the base control its troops' and contractors' off-post groundwater pumping, the base could face significant downsizing.

The future of the San Pedro River hangs in the balance.

Just because someone chooses to live in a rural area and gets duped by another new developer does not give them the right to destroy a public treasure like the San Pedro.

It is held in trust for future generations. We will continue to do everything possible to protect the river and the incredible wildlife that depend upon it.

