



Position Statement on the Proposed Villages at Vigneto Development

The Villages at Vigneto (Vigneto) is a large, Tuscany-inspired development proposed by El Dorado Benson, LLC (El Dorado) on 12,324 acres of private land located near Benson, AZ, population 5,100. Vigneto proposes 27,760 new homes, commercial developments, golf courses, parks, vineyards, lakes, orchards, resorts, and an extensive road and utility network, and is intended to attract up to 70,000 new residents.

Vigneto's large size and sensitive location near the San Pedro River and the Whetstone Mountains causes serious concern over the project's potential to negatively impact a bird migration corridor of hemispheric importance, habitat for numerous sensitive species, vital conservation mitigation lands, the wet cave system of Kartchner Caverns State Park, and the sustainability of human communities in the San Pedro River Valley. And significantly, water from this fragile desert river, already tenuous due to groundwater pumping, long-term drought and climate change, supports the San Pedro River Global Important Bird Area and the first-ever designated Riparian National Conservation Area.

The Villages at Vigneto proposed mega-development is a high priority issue for the Tucson Audubon Society. Vigneto represents a potentially significant threat to the imperiled and biologically rich San Pedro River, which has been widely recognized and studied for its international and even global ecological significance. The conservation and restoration of the San Pedro River has been a long-standing priority for Tucson Audubon because of its paramount value to birds, wildlife, riparian habitat, ecosystem functions, and vibrant ecotourism industry in our focal region of southeast Arizona.

Sustaining the San Pedro River is also a top-priority for numerous conservation organizations, government agencies and private land owners. The San Pedro River system has benefitted from significant investments in land and water conservation, including its use as a mitigation site for long-term preservation and restoration of lands set aside to offset development impacts elsewhere in the state. These irreplaceable conservation investments could certainly be jeopardized by unsustainable groundwater pumping associated with Vigneto.

These investments, as well as its high-profile designations, recognize and aim to protect the vital function the San Pedro River Valley plays as a continental-scale bird and wildlife migration corridor. With its very close proximity to the San Pedro River, we are concerned Vigneto could irreparably deplete and/or pollute the river, degrading or eliminating its habitat values. And, through time, groundwater pumping required to sustain a lush, Tuscan-inspired city could dramatically and irresponsibly deplete priceless groundwater resources.

Tucson Audubon requested that the Army Corps of Engineers re-evaluate the Clean Water Act 404 permit for Vigneto, in part because it has a 50% larger footprint than was originally permitted for Whetstone Ranch. We have asked the Corps to consider new information that has become available since the permit was issued in 2006. We have also requested that a full Environmental Impact Study be conducted and for the Corps to initiate consultation with the US Fish and Wildlife Service regarding potential impacts to threatened and endangered species and migratory birds.

Tucson Audubon advocates for legal and regulatory compliance, conducting and utilizing the best available science, and for the avoidance, minimization and mitigation of development impacts. It is essential to complete Phase 3 of the USGS study of subsurface water flows in the area to provide the best information with which to make informed decisions.

Tucson Audubon Society has not yet taken a position for or against the proposed Villages at Vigneto development. Tucson Audubon respects the rights of private property owners to develop their lands consistent with local, state and federal laws, and also advocates thorough environmental reviews based upon the best available science. Should the Villages at Vigneto move forward, Tucson Audubon will work to influence the project's design and intensity of use, so as to improve water and wildlife habitat conservation outcomes.