



THE STATE OF ARIZONA  
**GAME AND FISH DEPARTMENT**

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October 30, 2015

Ms. Michelle Johnson  
Planning Department  
City of Benson  
120 W Sixth Street  
Benson, AZ 85602

Re: Villages at Vigneto Final Community Master Plan and Development Plan

Dear Ms. Johnson:

The Arizona Game and Fish Department (Department) has reviewed the first draft of the Villages at Vigneto Final Community Master Plan and Development Plan (Plan). The Department understands the proposed master planned community would be constructed on undeveloped private lands south of Benson, ultimately covering an area of 12,167 acres, providing a mix of 28,000 age-targeted and traditional family homes. The Villages at Vigneto would also include commercial and recreational development including parks, storage lakes, open space, entertainment venues, golf courses, playing fields, and biking and hiking trails.

On October 13, 2015 we submitted the Villages at Vigneto project for review through the Department's Heritage Data Management System (HDMS) Online Environmental Review Tool (<https://azhgis2.esri.com/>) to provide current, reliable, objective information on Arizona's plant and wildlife species locations and status to aid in the environmental decision making process. The HDMS report (enclosed) provides a list of special status species that have been reported within a 3-mile vicinity of the project area and includes such species as lesser long-nosed bat, banded rock rattlesnake, southwestern willow flycatcher, and jaguar. A separate list of species predicted within the project vicinity is also included, indicating species that could occur in the area but have not been reported to the HDMS.

The Department would like to draw your attention to a number of important aspects of the Plan, with the intent of informing City of Benson staff and Council members of measures that could be taken to minimize the likelihood of wildlife-human conflicts and offset habitat loss.

Landscaping

The Villages at Vigneto plant palette is based on the City's recommended plant list for Benson (provided by the University of Arizona Cooperative Extension Water Wise Program) presumably to use low water landscaping. But, if the intent of the Villages at Vigneto design is truly to be "inspired and influenced by its surroundings", "intended to create a lifestyle made possible only

by the unique characteristics of the local natural environment”, show that “great care was taken to ensure the natural environment is enhanced or unharmed by the Development”, and “demonstrate how a properly designed community and the natural environment can coexist and benefit one another” as stated in the Plan, the use of many of the species in the plant palette is in direct conflict with such statements. For example, Russian olive (*Eleagnus angustifolia*) is widely recognized as an invasive, non-native tree and fountain grass (*Pennisetum setaceum*) is a non-native, invasive grass that can dramatically alter the native desert fire regime. Although the cultivar *P. setaceum rubrum* is purported to be non-invasive, including a plant that is so closely related to known noxious, invasive, non-native species such as buffelgrass (*P. ciliare*) or a number of other *Pennisetum* species is ill-advised. It would be more prudent to avoid planting species that are easily confused by the general public, thereby avoiding a predictable conflict with some residents’ desires for showy non-native plants. Likewise, planting of Afghan, Aleppo, and Italian Stone pines, trees that clearly are not evocative of native Arizona landscapes, is counter to the notion of a thoughtfully designed community in harmony with the natural environment. Selecting native species for landscaping the Villages at Vigneto would be in keeping with Benson’s historical setting as the “Gateway to the San Pedro Valley”.

Less than 30 percent of the species on the Villages at Vigneto Plant Palette are native to the area. To assist in your evaluation of an appropriate plant palette, the Department conducted a simple, quick online exercise using the Southwestern Environmental Information Network website (<http://swbiodiversity.org/seinet/index.php>) to build a species list (enclosed) from data of plant specimens collected within 10 miles of a point roughly at the center of the proposed Villages at Vigneto. More than 780 species representing 96 plant families native to the area, and documented within this localized area should be more than adequate to prepare a plant palette reflective of the Benson area. In addition to being adapted to the local ecology and natural rainfall patterns, these plants provide shelter and food to an astounding diversity of bird, mammal, reptile, amphibian, and insect life.

The Department strongly recommends salvage of healthy native plants from the development footprint in advance of clearing for construction. Salvaged plants should be stored onsite if possible and transplanted within the development footprint as a component of the landscaping plan. If some plants cannot be used in the landscaping plan, they should be made available to local landscapers or nurseries.

The City of Benson, in partnership with El Dorado Benson, LLC (El Dorado), has a tremendous opportunity to create a truly standout master planned community showcasing the unique ecosystem that characterizes Benson and the nearby Whetstone Mountains and San Pedro River Valley.

### Water Conservation

In addition to using native, desert-adapted landscaping, a number of other water conservation measures should be included in the overall plans for the Villages at Vigneto. The City of Tucson has adopted several water conservation ordinances for both commercial and residential properties that the City of Benson may want to consider for this or other future developments. For example, a gray water system can save a typical household 13,000 gallons of potable water per year. With the planned 28,000 units, that could save over 1,000 acre feet of water annually.

Curb cuts and curb cores can direct rainwater from streets into catchment basins to water landscaping, diverting considerable amounts of runoff, and if implemented at the construction phase, the cost should be negligible. An excellent resource for desert area rainwater harvesting information is [www.harvestingrainwater.com](http://www.harvestingrainwater.com). Also, the covenants, conditions, and restrictions should allow homeowners and businesses to install rainwater harvesting systems in accordance with recognized best management practices.

### Potential Wildlife Conflicts

The proposed vineyards, orchards, and effluent ponds will likely pose a conflict between wildlife and people. Animals are drawn to readily available food and water resources and could therefore be in conflict with grape and other fruit growing initiatives if appropriate exclusions are not also included in the plans for this new community. Regarding the proposed ponds please be aware that it is not uncommon for members of the public to place non-native fish and turtles in publicly accessible ponds, unaware this is a violation of state law. Such actions can result in those species dispersing to other water sources critical for native species, resulting in predation and competition for resources. If either the City or El Dorado would be interested in possibly enrolling any of these ponds in the Department's Community Fishing Program, please contact Scott Gurtin at [SGurtin@azgfd.gov](mailto:SGurtin@azgfd.gov) or 623-236-7262.

The Department has prepared a wealth of resources publicly available pertaining to living with wildlife. We have a number of species-specific brochures explaining simple things people can do to prevent wildlife conflicts around their homes and businesses. For example, securing garbage and pet food avoids attracting wildlife such as javelina and coyotes, or erecting a 4-foot-high wall around patio and garden areas is an effective javelina barrier. Please visit <http://azgfdportal.az.gov/wildlife/livingwith> for more information. The Department is available to work with planners, developers, and other decision-makers to identify potential wildlife-human conflicts and advise on solutions to minimize those conflicts. We are very interested in helping people learn what they can do to avoid wildlife conflicts while still providing valuable resources to the state's native wildlife.

### Wildlife Habitat Connectivity

At this level of planning, it does not yet appear to have been determined the means by which recreationists would travel across State Route 90. The Department is aware of a few box culverts beneath the highway that are probably used by some wildlife to cross the highway. If the plan for the Villages at Vigneto is for hikers, mountain bikers, and other recreationists to use these culverts, this would diminish the suitability for wildlife use. The Department has considerable experience advising transportation agencies on the characteristics of effective and ineffective wildlife crossing structures and has found that structures regularly used by people do not effectively accommodate wildlife. The considerable increase in vehicle traffic on State Route 90 that would result from this massive development will dramatically increase the likelihood of vehicle-wildlife collisions in the absence of adequate wildlife crossing structures. Therefore, we request involvement in any discussions between the City, El Dorado, and Arizona Department of Transportation with regard to pedestrian and wildlife crossing structures for State Route 90.

## Access

The Department's access program is a cost-share program with the main objective of working cooperatively with private landowners across the state to create and maintain public access. Some 4.5 million acres of State Trust and other public lands, or 6.1% of Arizona, is "landlocked" by privately owned lands and not legally accessible by public means such as established rights-of-way, easements, etc. Our Landowner Relations Program utilizes funds provided through the access program to perform various projects with private landowners in exchange for short-term or perpetual access agreements. Access funds can also be utilized to purchase perpetual public access easements on privately owned roads that can provide public access to federal lands.

Since approximately 1986, all vehicular routes into the northern end of the Whetstone Mountains have been blocked, gated and signed, or gated and locked by private landowners, denying access to approximately 15,000 acres of Coronado National Forest (CNF) lands. Over the past 25 to 30 years the Department and the CNF have attempted to work with area landowners to re-establish public access into the Forest's existing road system, in the north end of the Whetstones. To date, no landowners have been willing to grant rights-of-way for perpetual or term public access across their private lands for a variety of reasons including privacy issues, perceived potential liability, and in some cases a desire for exclusive use and control of the adjacent public lands.

At the April 7, 2015 Planning and Zoning meeting in Benson, El Dorado representatives stated that they would be willing to allow public access across their private property to the CNF, after they have completed the entire development. According to the projected phased development of the west side of El Dorado properties, this could equate to a 20-year wait for the public to use that road system. It is our understanding that at that time, the roads would be built to the City of Benson road standards and "open to the public", with the road maintenance and liability becoming the responsibility of the City of Benson.

While this proposal is not entirely without merit, the Department suggests an alternative: the Department would like to acquire, through purchase at fair market value, a "movable, relocatable or portable" perpetual ROW easement where we could build a low-maintenance level road, in the next several years, to restore public access to the Forest for motorized vehicles, equestrian and pedestrian recreation. That would include indemnification language to protect the El Dorado interests along this roadway and be a non-exclusive easement, consisting of a relocatable "Deed for Road" executed to the Arizona Game and Fish Commission.

The Department would like to discuss this proposal with the City and El Dorado, including how several potential locations for a ROW easement align with previously dedicated public easements (ca. 1977) currently crossing El Dorado properties.

## Mitigation

Because the Villages at Vigneto would represent such a substantial loss of wildlife habitat, the Department urges the City to work with El Dorado to formulate a plan to mitigate for this loss. The Department is available to assist with development of a mitigation plan and can provide input regarding species impacts and proposals to offset the habitat loss.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to provide input on the Villages at Vigneto Final Community Master Plan. Again, we urge you to consider the many resources available from the Department to guide you in your planning and decision-making for this significant change to the Benson area.

- Wildlife-friendly Guidelines  
[http://www.azgfd.gov/pdfs/w\\_c/WildlifeFriendlyDevelopment.pdf](http://www.azgfd.gov/pdfs/w_c/WildlifeFriendlyDevelopment.pdf)
- Fencing Guidelines  
[http://www.azgfd.gov/hgis/documents/110125\\_AGFD\\_fencing\\_guidelines.pdf](http://www.azgfd.gov/hgis/documents/110125_AGFD_fencing_guidelines.pdf)
- Culvert Guidelines  
<http://www.azgfd.gov/hgis/pdfs/CulvertGuidelinesforWildlifeCrossings.pdf>

The Department's *Living With Wildlife* webpage (<http://azgfdportal.az.gov/wildlife/livingwith>) provides information on how to identify and live amongst mountain lions, bobcats, coyotes, javelina, bears, bats, woodpeckers, and raptors, as well as a number of *Living With Wildlife* brochures. This webpage also provides links to other pages with information about selecting plants and designing landscapes that attract native birds and other small animals.

Please contact me directly at [kterpening@azgfd.gov](mailto:kterpening@azgfd.gov) or 520-388-4447 for further information or if you need clarification on any items in this correspondence.

Sincerely,



Kristin Terpening  
Region V Habitat Specialist

Enclosures:

Arizona Game and Fish Department HDMS project receipt  
SEINet plant species list for Villages at Vigneto area  
ADEQ Using Gray Water at Home brochure

cc: Raul Vega, Region V Supervisor  
Laura Canaca, Project Evaluation Program Supervisor