

# Desert Discovery Center is the poster child for the worst aspects of government

By Bob Littlefield, January 24, 2016

Last week the Scottsdale City Council approved spending 1.7 million bed tax dollars to fund another study of the proposed Desert Discovery Center (DDC) project. This is bad news for Scottsdale residents, because the DDC is the poster child for the worst aspects of government – massive overspending of taxpayer dollars, and politicians breaking promises to their constituents.



This decision brings the total amount of taxpayer money allocated to “study” this project to over 2 million dollars. Sadly, that is only a drop in the bucket compared to how much Scottsdale taxpayers will be forced to pay if this project is ever actually built. The last study estimated the cost of building this project to be 70-100 million dollars. Of course, these estimates are always low, plus the project has increased in size since the last study from 17 to 30 acres. Add to that the inevitable cost overruns and the probable total cost balloons to well over 100 million dollars!

*In one scenario for the Desert Discovery Center, visitors would walk into the fanged mouth, read up on the reptile's digestive system, and end in a translucent chamber that makes up the rattle.*

If the DDC qualified as a tourism project there is 30 million dollars in bonding capacity available from the bed tax. But the rest of the costs (not to mention a projected 1–3 million dollar shortfall in annual operating revenue) will have to come from the pockets of Scottsdale taxpayers, one way or the other. And that leaves no bed tax money for any other tourism-related projects.

The other big outrage in this proposal is the betrayal by the proponents of this project (including a majority of the City Councilmembers) of the promises made to the citizens of Scottsdale. When we voted seven times to tax ourselves for almost a billion dollars to buy the land for this unique and special Preserve, we were promised all of this land would remain undisturbed and free of commercial development. Now the proponents want the City Council to break that promise by bulldozing 30 acres inside the Preserve gateway to build the DDC. This development alone would be a huge breach of faith with the voters. But the precedent it would set will open the door to even more development inside the Preserve. So much for the promises made to the citizens of Scottsdale!

The duplicity and lack of transparency surrounding this project gets even worse. The proponents of this project know Scottsdale taxpayers will not vote for a massive tax increase to pay for this project. They also fear the voters would not approve amending the Preserve ordinances to allow such a project inside the Preserve boundary. So, to get this project built they are working feverishly to find ways to get their hands into the taxpayers' wallets **and** break the prohibition on development inside the Preserve, both without any public vote. So much for transparency and accountability in city government!

One of the most outrageous claims the proponents of this project make in an effort to sell this project to the public is that we need the DDC so residents and visitors can experience and enjoy the Preserve. This is simply false. One of the good things we did during my 12+ years on the City Council was to open ten trailheads (including the Preserve Gateway) to give Scottsdale residents and visitors access to the Preserve. We even provided handicapped access! The Preserve is open every day of the year from sunrise to sunset. Admission is free. On any day of the year you can go to the Preserve Gateway and see Scottsdale residents, visitors from other parts of the US, and foreign tourists experiencing and enjoying the Preserve. Bottom line, the DDC is unnecessary as well as expensive and intrusive.

Some residents think this is just a North Scottsdale issue. Not so. Taxpayers from all parts of Scottsdale paid for the Preserve and would be forced to pay the costs of the DDC if it is built. Plus, if the City Council can break the solemn promises made to the voters about the Preserve, then there is no commitment made by Scottsdale city government that residents can count on, wherever they live in our beautiful city.

Bottom line, the Preserve belongs to the citizens of Scottsdale, not to special interests who want to leverage it for their own self-serving interests. And it most certainly does not belong to the City Council to play with as they wish.

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