

Wild and Scenic designation for Upper Verde River? Prescott City Council supports growing effort



Gary Beverly, president of the Citizens Water Advocacy Group (CWAG), will provide an update on the importance of Arizona's only surviving river and its questionable future in a colorful Zoom Meeting on Saturday, Apr. 10 from 10am-noon. (Courtesy)



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In a unanimous and enthusiastic endorsement, the proposal to designate about 74 miles of the Upper Verde River and its tributaries as a Wild and Scenic River got support from the Prescott City Council this week.

During a workshop meeting on Tuesday, Jan. 3, the City Council voted 6-0 (with Councilman Eric Moore absent) to comment in support of the Prescott National Forest's suitability study that the Verde River is suitable as a Wild and Scenic River, and to submit a letter supporting the designation by the U.S. Congress of the Upper Verde River as a Wild and Scenic River.

Council members expressed strong support for the designation, maintaining that the Upper Verde River meets the criteria for the designation.

"The river is wild and scenic, so why not designate it as that?" Councilman Steve Sischka said.

And Mayor Phil Goode – noting that the City of Prescott had sent a similar letter of support for an (ultimately failed) attempt for the designation in 1980 – said, "Since we go back to 1980, 43 years probably is enough time to weigh the pros and cons, so I certainly would support this," he said.

The council's action followed the recommendation in a presentation by designation proponent Gary Beverly, who told the council he had been working on the designation through the Sierra Club for about 15 years.

Showing a scenic photo of the Upper Verde, Beverly said, "This is from my first hike down the river in 2008, and it's just really a beautiful place, and this really inspired me to begin working to protect this river."

He said the designation would run from the headwaters of the Verde River in Paulden to Clarkdale for 44.5 miles, and would also take in tributaries, such as a 1.6-mile segment of Lower Granite Creek and Sycamore Creek, for a total of 74 river miles.



Gary Beverly, chair of the Yavapai Group of the Sierra Club, left, gives a report to the Prescott City Council on Tuesday, Jan. 3, 2023 about a proposal to designate the Upper Verde River as a Wild and Scenic River. The council ultimately supported the action in 6-0 vote. (Cindy Barks/Courier)

Beverly, the chair of the Yavapai Group of the Sierra Club, told the council that the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act from 1968 is "the highest form of federal protection for rivers. It requires approval by the U.S. Congress and the president."

The designation protects free-flowing rivers that have "outstandingly remarkable values (ORVs)," Beverly said, adding that the Verde River's classic landscape beauty is among its remarkable values.

But he stressed that the river has many other outstanding values as well, including its wildlife diversity, its free-flowing nature, and its water quality.

"This watershed is really rich in wildlife," Beverly said, noting that a biological survey counted 478 vertebrate species, including a number of endangered species.

Beverly outlined several concerns that have arisen in the community, such as worries that the designation would restrict access to the area. "That's just not true; it actually protects it," Beverly said, adding, "It doesn't require landowners to grant public access. It has really no impact on private land, except it usually increases the value of it."

In addition, Beverly said the designation would not affect existing water rights. "Federal water rights are established by case law, not by statute," he said. "A water right from the Wild and Scenic River is junior to prior existing rights. This is a really important fact."

Councilman Clark Tenney told Beverly, "I was generally supportive of this beforehand, and even more so now." But Tenney had a number of questions about the possible costs and future impacts. "Who's going to come back to me two years from now, 10 years from now, and say, 'What were you thinking?'" Tenney asked.

In response, Beverly maintained that the designation would be relatively inexpensive to manage, in part because it is not easily accessible, and he suggested that the question council members would face about the designation is what had taken so long.

The designation generated several comments of support from the audience as well.

Local resident Joel Barnes told the council, "After hearing your response to Gary's presentation, I want to thank you in advance for the support you're showing the Upper Verde. It's not just about saving the river; it's about saving a piece of who we are as a community."

He added, "The fact that we're really stepping up and saying that we support this designation is something that not only will you not regret, but I think you'll be praised for it in the future. It's a great legacy."

And Joanne Oellers, chair of the Save the Dells organization, said, "Save the Dells absolutely supports the City Council submitting a letter of support or resolution."

Oellers said the organization sees the Wild and Scenic designation as "an extremely important action," because it would "demonstrate a long-term regional legacy of conservation."

Goode suggested that the council's motion of support should include the city's concerns about an acceptable design and construction plans for proposed fish dams in the river, and the council agreed, before voting 6-0 to approve the action.

Beverly told the council that the first task in proposing the designation was to build community support, and about 70 businesses throughout the county have already indicated support. The next step was to get support from governments, which was the purpose of this week's presentation, he said.

"In the next three months, we'll be approaching the Arizona Congressional delegation, and eventually introduce legislation to Congress, probably later this year," Beverly said.

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