

San Tan park to get boost



ANDY SAWYER/TRIBUNE

A View of San Tan Mountains Regional Park

Q.C. says county to give preserve status to adjacent land

BY JOE KULLMAN
TRIBUNE

More than 300 acres of state trust land adjacent to San Tan Regional Park south of Queen Creek will be set aside for conservation, town officials said, boosting efforts to control development and protect open space in one of the south East Valley's most scenic areas.

The 10,200-acre park several miles south of Gilbert, Chandler and Mesa is in Pinal County, but owned and managed by Maricopa County. The counties joined Queen Creek last year in seeking protection under the Arizona Preserve Initiative for 600 acres of trust land next to the park.

Queen Creek Town Manager Cynthia Seelhammer said she's been notified that Land Commissioner Mike Anable is preparing to grant conservation status for 320 acres, giving the town and counties five years to come up with the funds to lease or purchase the land.

The other 280 acres will remain under consideration for conservation until it's determined whether adjacent private and public parcels will be developed, Seelhammer said.

Plans are to add whatever land can be preserved to the San Tan park.

The project evolved from grass-roots efforts by south East Valley residents concerned about rapid loss of open desert in the area. They were alarmed last year when Maricopa County officials discussed selling more than 2,000 acres in San Tan park for money to fund park improvements there and at other county parks.

"We banded together and got them to back off," said Arlen Rosbrook, a leader of the San Tan Mountains Pride Association. "But we keep hearing rumblings they are still trying to figure out ways to sell that land. There's not going to be much open space left here if that happens."

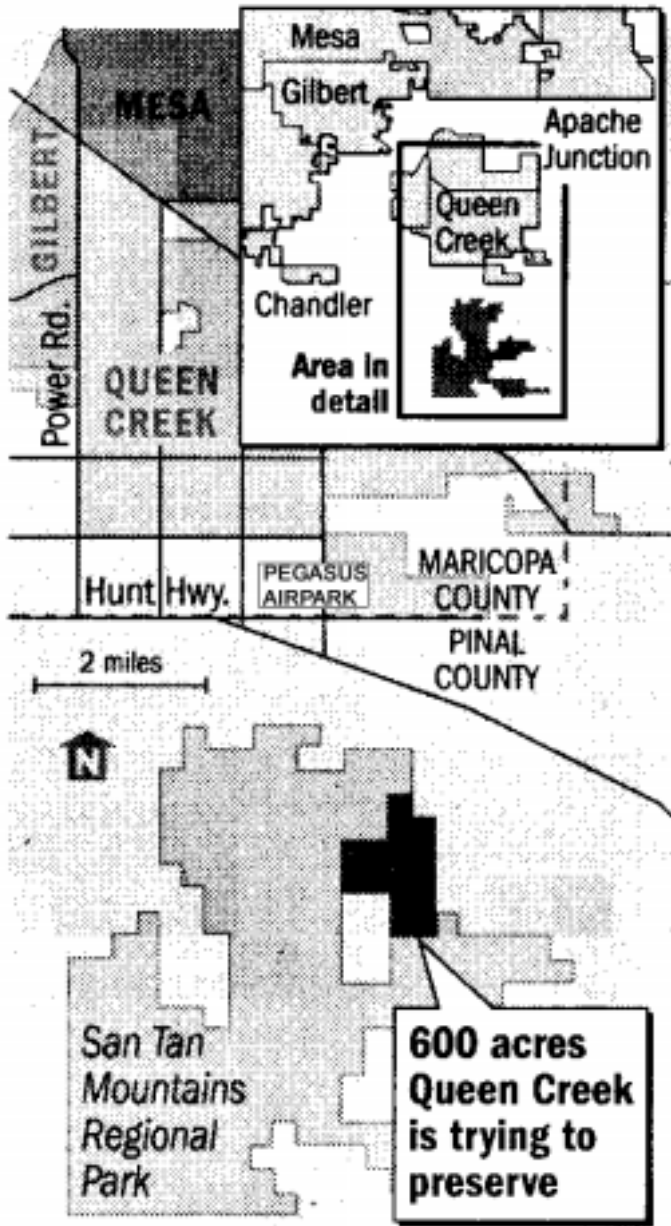
The group of about 65 residents helped lobby the State Land Department in support of Queen Creek's conservation petition. New members are being recruited, and the group is incorporating as a nonprofit organization so it can raise funds and apply for grants to aid the town's preservation quest, Rosbrook said.

"People see a lot of undeveloped land out here and wonder what we're worried about," said Town Councilman Bill Heath, who heads the council's San Tan Park Committee. "They don't realize how much of that open land is already platted for subdivisions. Our farm land is going to be growing houses."

Queen Creek's population of 5,000 is projected to jump by about 700 new residents a year for the next several years. In addition, as many as 120,000 new homes could eventually go up near the town in two dozen subdivisions already approved for development in Pinal County. Thousands more are expected to move into unincorporated areas of Maricopa County.

"We want to get as much open space as possible while we still can," Seelhammer said.

Meanwhile, Maricopa County is updating its master plan for San Tan park. It could include future sale of some park land, which might hurt chances of preserving state land in the area, Seelhammer said.



Queen Creek also has to wait to resolve a long-time dispute over parking near the San Tan Mountains, she said.

The town wants another place for vehicles to be parked other than at the edge of the only paved road leading into the park.

County officials have said they won't consider building a parking lot within the park's borders until the new master plan is complete.

Tribune writer Joe Kullman can be reached by e-mail at jkullman@aztrib.com or by calling (480) 970-2342.

TRIBUNE