

## Trudeau: The politics of open space protection

Originally Published: January 15, 2019 9:32 p.m.

<https://www.dcourier.com/news/2019/jan/15/trudeau-politics-open-space-protection/>

There's a growing conversation about transparency in the City of Prescott's negotiations with Arizona Eco Development (AED), starting with Tom Cantlon's column "Closed door negotiations about the Dells are happening now" (Daily Courier, Nov. 27, 2018). Mayor Greg Mengarelli validated these meetings in a New Year's column where he said that "It's no surprise that the City of Prescott has been in extensive conversations with Arizona Eco Development" (Daily Courier, Dec. 31, 2018). Yet the public has heard essentially nothing regarding the status of this negotiation, despite the importance of this issue.

Save the Dells' email inbox and Facebook page have hosted considerable discussion about transparency, as our audience becomes increasingly vocal about holding council's feet to the fire to protect the 500 acres of AED's development that we've identified as a critically important open space priority. If you haven't seen our map of which acres these are, you can find it online at [www.savethedells.org/maps-prescott-az](http://www.savethedells.org/maps-prescott-az).

I want to ask everyone to think about the process unfolding in City Hall. Of course there are confidential meetings and closed-door negotiations; that's entirely normal, and as chairman of Save the Dells, I've been in closed-door meetings with the city manager and some councilors. Like it or not, not all meetings are open to the public or announced publicly. That's why Save the Dells has worked hard to ensure you're kept informed, and we'll increase these efforts when this comes before the Planning and Zoning Commission later this winter.

I'm pleased that the city manager is negotiating with AED. It means our advocacy — and your voices — have been heard. Sure, some councilors aren't hearing us, but most of them are. It's important we not treat council as a single entity; it's made up of seven individuals, some of whom support Save the Dells' proposal to protect AED's 500 critical acres in exchange for the numerous benefits of annexation and rezoning — including supplying about 100 million gallons of city water per year.

Our proposal seems like common sense. It follows the current Land Development Code, the General Plan, the Open Space Master Plan, and doesn't aim to reduce AED's potential profitability. But there are detractors, mainly those attempting to create distractions and make this a debate about property rights. An earlier column

by Cantlon (Nov. 13, 2018), as well as my last column (Oct. 20, 2018), have made clear that the city already regulates private property through codes, zoning, and ordinances. Furthermore, the public has rights to the Peavine and Iron King trails, which were purchased with public tax dollars and would be harmed by AED's five proposed road crossings. It seems like our critics are grasping for straws by pushing this narrative, and I would welcome a real debate in a public forum on this issue.

Some closed-door meetings may be appropriate for sensitive negotiations, but only if the goal is a good deal for taxpayers and open space advocates. We're making sure that this is not a "business as usual" situation, which almost always favors the developer. After all, it's us, the taxpayers, who end up bearing the long-term financial liability of infrastructure maintenance and providing emergency services into perpetuity. As soon as AED's proposal lands on the Planning and Zoning Commission desk, however, the confidential meetings must come to an end.

The city seems to have a problem with public trust and transparency, and I can offer a solution for it: The more Save the Dells is involved in the process, the more confident the public will feel with the outcome. Whatever happens, three sitting council members and the mayor are up for re-election in 2019, and we'll make sure that Saving the Dells is on the ballot, one way or another.

Joe Trudeau of Prescott is chairman of Save the Dells. Learn more at [www.savethedells.org](http://www.savethedells.org).