

**STATEMENT OF WOODY CLINE
GILA COUNTY ARIZONA SUPERVISOR
ON HR 1829
PLEASANT VALLEY VETERANS RETREAT
BEFORE THE
HOUSE SUBCOMMITTEE ON FEDERAL LANDS
JULY 20, 2023**

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify on H.R.1829, to require the Secretary of Agriculture to convey the Pleasant Valley Ranger District Administrative Site to Gila County, Arizona. I would like to commend the bill's sponsor, Rep. Eli Crane, R-AZ for introducing this legislation and for recognizing the uniqueness of the area and its many outstanding resources that could benefit our veterans.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Gila County proposes to provide a peaceful respite for veterans and their families in a beautiful retreat-like facility in Young, Arizona. The subject property consists of 232 acres of pristine land along with a number of buildings for meetings and overnight accommodations.

PROJECT LOCATION

The project location is in Young, Arizona. The nearest cities to Young are Payson, 60 miles to the northwest, and Globe/Miami 65 miles to the south. From the Phoenix area, Young is about 150 miles away and typically takes 2.5 to 3 hours by vehicle. The site is a former Tonto National Forest (TNF) Administrative Site for the Payson/Pleasant Valley Ranger District. In 2016 the TNF began moving out of the facility and re-located to Payson where a new administrative site was built.



In 2017, Gila County began talks with TNF staff for the ownership of the property to be transferred to Gila County. During the many discussions with TNF staff, they admitted that eventually the buildings on the property would be “bull-dozed” due to a lack of maintenance funds. County staff along with myself determined that the best way to protect the site and buildings was to seek ownership. One of the buildings that would have been bulldozed included a 6,000 square foot administrative office building built in 2001 and occupied in 2002.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION: Many discussions were held with county staff, community members and leaders regarding the re-use of the site. Early on, it was determined that it would be the ideal place to provide a retreat-like facility for veterans and their families that need a peaceful respite for healing and re-connection.

BACKGROUND: Meetings were held with the Tonto National Forest Supervisor, Neil Bosworth as well as United States Forest Service Chief Vicki Christensen and Deputy Chris French in Washington, DC. I also held discussions and sought advice from Congressional staff to determine the best path for the county

to obtain ownership and have the site along with buildings, transferred to Gila County. It was determined that a bill needed to be written and presented to both the House and the Senate in order to start the transfer of ownership. In 2020 Tonto National Forest Service Supervisor Neil Bosworth suggested a 20-year Special Use Permit in order for Gila County to begin the development of the site into a Veterans Camp/Retreat and provide the much-needed maintenance of buildings and land. The property contains a number of structures and an RV park that will be a part of the project:

- 6,000 square foot administrative building
- 2 brick residences
- 2 sets of barracks (can sleep 10 each with kitchens)
- Historic Ranger Office
- Historic Ranger House
- Historic barn
- Heli pads
- Well and wastewater system

The three historic structures are listed on the National Historic Register of Historic Places. That fact prompted a consultation with the State Historic Preservation Office (SHPO) and that consultation was held in April of 2020. The consultation included an assessment of the current condition of the buildings and advice from SHPO regarding the maintenance and restoration of the buildings. A plan was developed by County staff and submitted to the SHPO in May of 2020 and approved in June of 2020. The Special Use Permit could not be approved without the SHPO consultation.



Once SHPO approved the county's plan regarding the historic structures, the next step was to develop an Operating Plan that was submitted to the TNF for consultation and approval. The Operating Plan was approved in May 2021. Gila County wholeheartedly accepts the responsibility of the preservation of these historic structures.

The Special Use Permit was developed by TNF staff and presented to Gila County. The Special Use Permit and supporting documents was approved by the Gila County Board of Supervisors on July 27, 2021 and signed by the Tonto National Forest Supervisor on July 28, 2021.

On March 28, 2023, Rep. Eli Crane (R-AZ) introduced Bill HR 1829 and on March 28, 2023 Senator Mark Kelly (D-AZ) and Senator Kyrsten Sinema (D-AZ) to convey the Pleasant Valley Ranger District Administrative Site to Gila County, Arizona.

On February 6, 2023, Arizona State Legislator, Rep. David Marshall (R) introduced HB 2725 (appropriation; Department of Veteran Services to appropriate \$1M of state general fund money to Gila County for the Pleasant Valley Veterans Retreat. During the course of the State budget process, the amount increased from \$1M to \$3M. The bill was included in Arizona Governor Katie Hobbs (D) final state budget.

GILA COUNTY COMMITMENT TO PROJECT: The Gila County Board of Supervisors and county staff fully support this project. The County is committed to being good stewards of the beautiful land and buildings included on the site. Prior to the lease being in place, the historic buildings were cleaned and "rodent proofed" (with Tonto National Forest (TNF) approval) in order to protect them from further

damage. Without the County's involvement the historic structures and other buildings would have fallen into disrepair and eventually would have been removed by the Forest Service due to a lack of maintenance funds.

Included in the Special Use Permit is the condition that the TNF may offset all or part of the permit fee by the amount paid by the holder for renovation, reconditioning, improvement, and maintenance deemed to be the government's responsibility, pursuant to Granger-Thye Fee Offset, 16 U.S.C. 580d. Gila County has accepted that responsibility.

The Gila County Board of Supervisors approved an allocation of \$2.5 million to the project and to date \$1.6 million has been contracted and \$200,000 has been invested in the water and wastewater treatment system. The water and wastewater system also supports the Tonto National Forest's outlying Fire Station (still located on the site but not included in the 232 acres) for fire suppression.

The transfer of ownership to the County will ensure that this beautiful property will be protected and maintained preserving its rich history in the community of Young and Gila County.

Gila County Vision: We believe in the Family Unit and its ability to heal. We support military service members by reconnecting the family unit through a holistic approach within nature, while connecting the family unit with resources and programs.

Framework for Veterans Retreat: As listed above, there are several buildings on the site that will be remodeled to provide the ultimate experience for veterans and their families.

The current administration building will become the "Main Lodge" that will provide a check in area, meeting space, game and resource rooms. A Veteran Ceremonial Grounds will be included at the Main Lodge as well. Also included, will be family housing, playground areas, walking trails sand volleyball court, horseshoe pits, gym & activity center.

Improvements Completed

The administration building has been completed and is ready to accept veteran events and to facilitate services.

The two existing barracks have been remodeled to include new kitchens and bathrooms and will house 10 veterans per night. A large common area in each of the barracks will provide a gathering place for group meetings or relaxing.

The two brick residences have been remodeled and will be available for families or individuals to occupy on a limited basis.

The RV Park has been upgraded and will provide 7 campsites for groups, families or individuals.

Future Planned Improvements

The Historic Ranger residence and the Historic District Office will be remodeled and will expand on the overnight options for families. Our vision includes a “Family Reconnect” program for families in crisis or families needing to reconnect after a parent has returned from a deployment.

Also in the planning stages is the construction of an event center that will provide a commercial kitchen and dining area as well as areas for recreational activities and meeting space. And in addition, a handicapped accessible house will be built to accommodate disabled individuals.

Statewide Support

As I previously mentioned, we have had bi-partisan support for this project. Rep. David Marshal (R) introduced HR 2725 and Governor Katie Hobbs (D) included the bill in the State’s budget.

On January 19, 2023, the County Supervisors Association, an association that includes all 15 Arizona counties passed Resolution Number 1-23 in support of the Pleasant Valley Veterans Retreat.

The bills introduced in Congress include a bill co-sponsored by our Arizona Senators Kelly and Sinema, both Democrats and Rep. Eli Crane our Republican. Crane and Kelly are both veterans and recognize the importance of a retreat for veterans and the re-purposing of this federal land.

This concludes my testimony. Thank you for the opportunity to discuss this important issue and I would be willing to answer any questions you may have.