

FROM THE PUBLISHER

# Chamber supports wilderness areas

GLCCC spent countless hours over three years to understand, help negotiate wilderness issues

By DAVID E. McCOLLUM

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In this week's letters, Bud Russo writes about the Greater Las Cruces Chamber of Commerce's "conspicuous" absence from a recent event supporting the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks Wilderness designation. He also urges chamber members to "get the facts" to "make up your own mind" about protecting our area's natural resources.

Respectfully, we are publishing Mr. Russo's letter. I, as the immediate past president of the GLCCC, would like to comment on Mr. Russo's – and undoubtedly others' – questions about what the chamber has done over the past several years to carefully consider the wilderness issues in

order to establish a public position.

Local citizens should be aware that for at least the past three years, the chamber has participated in many presentations on proposed wilderness areas in our region. The chamber even formed a new committee to study the proposals. During that time, chamber volunteers spent hundreds of hours in meetings with U.S. Sen. Jeff Bingaman, and former U.S. Sen. Pete Domenici, their staff, local wilderness advocates, local farmers and ranchers, other organizations and interested citizens. This intensive research culminated with an invitation for the Wilderness Act advocates to present their case at a regular board meeting in mid-2008. Also invited to present their recommendations were representatives from a regional coalition of ranchers and farmers.

The two proposals were similar. Both provided absolute protection of the Organ Mountains and foothill areas. The ranchers and farmers, in their alternative plan, suggested some modifications and they said they were willing to negotiate finer points of the legislation. The wilderness-only proponents refused to negotiate any of the terms.

The chamber board voted unanimously to endorse the People for Preserving Our Western Heritage proposal from the ranchers and farmers.

A few months later, the wilderness-only proponents asked to be allowed to make a second presentation to the chamber board. They were invited to do so, as were supporters of the counter-proposal. After the presentation, the chamber board again voted unanimously to support the ranchers and farmers.

The entire board felt strongly, as evidenced by their unanimous votes, that the Wilderness Act proposal was flawed for what it is intended to do. The Wilderness Act advocates' refusal to consider negotiating even the smallest of details in the legislation also swayed the board members. After the second vote, the chamber published their position to members and the entire community through a series of emails, public press releases and commentary in the chamber's monthly publication, *The Bottom Line*.

The chamber has been very clear that the business community supports certain wilderness designations in southern New Mexico. The chamber also recognizes the concept that having protected areas in and around a community can be beneficial to the entire community.

With all the extensive research and effort that chamber leaders and volunteers have put into the wilderness issue, it is unfortunate that some individuals and organizations have attempted to place the chamber in a dark light of being anti-wilderness. As for the lack of a GLCCC presence at the recent symposium, this information is incorrect. The truth is that several GLCCC board members attended as well as representatives from other chamber business members. Even though the event was sponsored in part by the Hispano Chamber de Las Cruces, both chambers traditionally support each other's events and activities, and many businesses are members of other organizations.

Regardless of what is being said and/or rumored, every Las Crucean should know that the GLCCC has moved beyond being the exclusive "good ol' boy" network of the olden days. For anyone who takes a close look at today's chamber, they will find an organization that represents nearly 1,000 members and has a diverse board of directors who have worked hard to be inclusive and supportive of an excellent quality of life in Las Cruces.

That's what a local community and a local chamber should be about.