

Their View: What makes a national monument

By Jerry G. Schickedanz / For the Sun-News Las Cruces Sun-News

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I attended the May 21, 2012 County Commission meeting after I read in the newspaper that morning a resolution supporting the Organ Mountains-Desert Peaks National Monument was on the agenda. I arrived at 8:30 and saw the agenda item was on the consent agenda to be passed along with many other mundane items with no comment. I asked a clerk what it would take to move the item off the consent agenda and she conferred with some other officials and came and told me that it would be moved to the public comment portion of the agenda.

I was not surprised to learn that Commissioner Billy Garrett's resolution to support the 600,000 acre national monument was well choreographed. There were three speakers well-armed with a CD containing many color pictures of historical and archeological sites in the county. They were given unlimited time to present their favorable presentation for restricting access on 600,000 acres of Dona Ana County, an area equivalent to the size of the state of Rhode Island. There were 12 to 15 others citizens appropriately ready to speak in favor of the national monument.

My presentation was limited to three minutes, which I organized while sitting in the chambers prior to being recognized to speak. Those were also the same conditions of two others who spoke in opposition to the resolution. I spoke in opposition to the resolution because there had been no scheduled public hearing by the commissioners to address the issues.

The process of the commissioners approving the resolution as a message from the people they represent was a sham, as they voted 5-0 in favor of supporting the resolution. I was informed that any concerns that I had about the 600,000 acre proposal would be taken care of by the Bureau of Land Management's management plan after the proclamation had been signed by President Obama. The problem is, the management plan implements what the president says in his proclamation, so we are still at the mercy of one man's language.

I recommended that the commissioners not approve the resolution without a public hearing, but was informed that there had been many hearings held over the years on the issue. Yes, there have been hearings held, but they dealt with federal wilderness on 240,000 acres not 600,000 acres for a national monument. They are two very separate and distinct issues.

The issue of protection was raised as something that was necessary for the historical and archeological sites. A large majority of these sites are not accessible by the tourists the proponents claim will be coming here, as they will be driving highway vehicles. The Green Chamber of Commerce touts studies of national monuments to bring in more money for the area. However, the studies are for site specific national monuments such as White Sands National Monument and are not the same as the proposed national monument with single sites scattered over 1,000 square miles that are not easily accessible.

If protection of these sites is a priority, then why can't we have a public forum to set some

priorities on sites that may need protection, not a blanket 600,000 acres with restricted access? The very description of a national monument describes it as the "smallest area necessary to protect the site." I don't think 600,000 acres is the smallest area necessary to protect the historical, archeological and cultural sites.

We recommend that if the county commission resolution is to have any true validity and reflect the community desires, the commissioners should rescind their vote and conduct a proper forum relative to what the community needs are for a national monument.

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