

## 11.0 Open Space Acquisition and Preservation

### 11.1 Introduction

Pinal County’s outstanding scenery and healthy natural environment provide diverse recreational opportunities; these amenities factor strongly into our resident’s quality of life. As Pinal County continues to grow, there is a growing need to preserve, protect, and maintain adequate open space and recreational opportunities. The policies in this plan strive to balance our need for providing diverse recreational opportunities with our need to preserve the county’s natural environment.

### 11.2 Inventory

The following information provides an overview of Pinal County’s current designated parks; as well as the state and federal lands currently designated as recreation areas within Pinal County. In addition, an overview of the County’s four regional trail corridors is provided.

#### 11.2.1 Pinal County Parks

Currently, the County manages and maintains five parks throughout the county which includes 295 acres (Table 1, *Pinal County Parks*). Recreation areas owned and maintained by Home Owners Associations (HOA’s) were not inventoried.

**Table 1. Pinal County Parks**

<b>Parks</b>	<b>Acreage</b>
Dudleyville Park	9.94
Oracle Park	4.92
Pinal County Fairgrounds	120.00
Pinal West/Kortsen Park	160.00
Randolph Park	.74

#### 11.2.2 National Forests, Monuments, State Parks, or Wilderness Areas

Table 2, *National Forests, Monuments, State Parks, or Wilderness Areas within Pinal County*, shows the current existing recreation areas, their respective size, and the managing agencies found throughout the county. Within Pinal County there are currently seven National Forests, Monuments, or Wilderness Areas totaling approximately 357,348 acres. In addition, several state parks and mountain parks are located within the County that total approximately 42,572 acres as identified below.

**Table 2. National Forests, Monuments, State Parks, or Wilderness Areas Within Pinal County**

<b>Recreation Area</b>	<b>Acres Within Pinal County</b>	<b>Managing Agency</b>
Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area	17,133	BLM
Boyce Thompson Arboretum	323	Arizona State Parks
Coronado National Forest	26,071	USDA Forest Service
Ironwood Forest National Monument	25,372	BLM
Lost Dutchman State Park	286	Arizona State Parks
McFarland State Historic Park	2	Arizona State Parks
Oracle State Park	4,000	Arizona State Parks
Picacho Peak State Park	335	Arizona State Parks
San Tan Mountain Regional Park	10,213	Maricopa County
Sonoran Desert National Monument	55,735	BLM
Superstition Wilderness Area	73,177	USDA Forest Service
Table Top Wilderness	32,394	BLM
Tonto National Forest	127,466	USDA Forest Service
Tortolita Mountain Park	27,413	Pima County
White Canyon Wilderness	5790	BLM

### 11.2.3 Regional Trails

There are four primary regional trail corridors that are currently planned or being developed. The four corridors are: the Arizona Trail, the Central Arizona Project (CAP) canal corridor, Juan Batista De Anza National Historic Trail, and the Great Western Trail.

#### *The Arizona Trail*

The Arizona Trail is a 790-mile nonmotorized state scenic trail that hikers, bikers and equestrians can use. Through use of existing trails or primitive roads, the Arizona Trail, connects Utah and Mexico through Arizona.

#### *The Central Arizona Project Canal*

The CAP canal is a 336-mile-long system of aqueducts, tunnels, and pipelines constructed by the Bureau of Reclamation (BOR). The intent is to include a 10-foot wide paved, non-motorized path adjacent to these facilities. The trail will also provide a connection to the Maricopa County Regional Trails System.

#### *Juan Bautista de Anza National Historic Trail*

This 1,200-mile trail will follow the Santa Cruz River to the Pima villages along the Gila River, and then follows the Gila to its Junction with the Colorado River. The intent of the trail is to provide a multi-modal, paved and non-paved historic recreational trail.

*The Great Western Trail*

The Great Western Trail (GWT) will traverse the 4,455 miles from Mexico to Canada. The multi-modal GWT takes advantage of linking existing trails and roadways through publicly-administered BLM lands and linking 18 National Forests.

**11.3 Park Level of Service Standards**

Every community needs and wants areas dedicated to active recreation. Pressures have increased for additional parks, open space and trails on public and privately owned land. In 2000 the population of Pinal County was 179,727. This is expected to grow to 1,206,000 by 2025. Failure to provide adequate facilities overburdens existing parks and forces residents to travel long distances to take advantage of recreational opportunities.

In order to provide adequate recreational facilities for County residents a level of service was developed from a comparison of the National Recreation and Park Association (NRPA) standards and benchmarking of similar communities. The desired level of service for public or private park land in Pinal County is displayed in Table 3, *Park Level of Service*.

**Table 3. Park Level of Service**

<i>Park Type</i>	<i>Standard # of Square Feet (SF) per Dwelling Unit (DU)</i>	<i>Desirable Size (Acres)</i>	<i>Service Area (Radius)</i>
Neighborhood Parks	435 SF/DU	8.0-10.0	½ mile
Community Parks	610 SF/DU	60-100	3 mile
Regional Parks	740 SF/DU	200+	½ hour drive time

**11.3.1 Future Needs**

The County is using level of service standards identified in Table 3, *Park Level of Service* to calculate the need for new park facilities using the 2025 Pinal County population of 1,206,000. The existing parkland at the neighborhood, community, and regional level is severely deficient based on the desired level of service. The need to provide parkland to enhance the level of service for the existing and future population is presented in Table 4, *Park Acreage Needs*.

**Table 4. Park Acreage Needs**

<i>Park Type</i>	<i>Standard # of Square Feet (SF) per Dwelling Unit (DU)</i>	<i>Existing Facilities</i>	<i>Total Need by 2025</i>	<i>Level of Service Gap</i>
Neighborhood Park	435 SF/DU	3 (15.61 ac)	3,618 ac	3,602 ac
Community Park	610 SF/DU	2 (280 ac)	6,030 ac	5,750 ac
Regional Park	740 SF/DU	None	7,236 ac	7,236 ac
Total		5 (295.61 ac)	16,884 ac	16,588 ac

**11.3.2 Neighborhood and Community Parks**

Pinal County’s neighborhood and community parks are to be provided through private development. In the past, the County has not always differentiated between neighborhood parks and small recreation areas provided by private development. The County currently requires that at least 15% of the total area in all Planned Area Developments (PAD) be developed as open space. Sometimes these areas are small, poorly located, and do not provide the recreational level of service needed for a neighborhood park. As a result the residents of the County are not served with appropriate neighborhood or community parks. By applying the level of service standards new development will be able to meet the parks needs of new residents.

**11.3.3 Regional Parks**

Five new regional parks are proposed. These regional parks will ensure a service level access to regional and national recreational open space within a 30 minute drive from anywhere within Pinal County. Additional acreage for regional parks can be provided through a variety of other preservation/acquisitions techniques, as discussed in Section 11.7, *Open Space Preservation Techniques*.

The following describes the five proposed regional parks.

- The regional park proposed along the east side of the City of Florence planning boundary may provide passive and active recreational opportunities.
- The regional park proposed to the north of Picacho Peak State Park may provide more passive-oriented recreational opportunities that would conserve the natural resources located within this area while allowing users to experience the natural environment.
- The regional park located west of Highway 79 and east of the proposed regional park near Picacho Peak State Park may provide active and passive recreational opportunities.

- The regional park proposed on the western edge of the County was identified in the City of Maricopa's General Plan, and represents the desired future plans for the city. The County has identified additional areas surrounding the proposed regional park, and provided additional connectivity to the Table Top Wilderness Area.
- The regional park located north of Florence Junction may provide passive and active recreational opportunities that would help to support the growing needs to the users located in the surrounding communities and municipalities.

## **11.4 Open Space**

Natural open space is essential to the overall well being of a community. Natural open space in Pinal County is being developed at a rapid rate. Open space conserves existing resources such as natural scenic beauty, view corridors, biological agricultural resources, and cultural heritage for the benefit of present and future generations.

The growing need for a public open space system to protect natural resources, critical habitats, and other environmentally sensitive lands is a key area of focus for the County. In 2003, Arizona State Parks conducted a telephone survey of residents in Pinal County. The survey results indicated that respondents preferred nature oriented parks and would prefer to see acquisition dollars go toward buying large open spaces with habitat for wildlife.

### **11.4.1 Benefits of Open Space Preservation**

The benefits of open space preservation are well known. Open space protects our water supply, reduces flood hazards, promotes diversity of plants and wildlife, and provides places for the enjoyment of nature and scenic beauty. By preserving open space within the framework of parks, greenways, and other preserved land, an interconnected system of natural and cultural resources can be established. There are several ways in which open space can benefit Pinal County:

*Wildlife and native plant habitat.* Open spaces provide habitat for native plants and animals that cannot live in urban and suburban environments. Large tracts are particularly important to native species. Large desert areas are also needed to support many native birds.

The plan identifies high-value habitat areas which are typically undisturbed (relatively pristine) areas with good wildlife movement corridors, and provide optimal cover, food, and water resources. Critical habitats as defined by the Endangered Species Act are areas that are occupied by a species listed as threatened or endangered within which are found geographical features essential to the conservation of the species, or an area not currently occupied by the species which is itself essential to the conservation of the species.

*Sensitive lands and natural resource preservation.* Open space can be used to preserve unique and sensitive natural features, including but not limited to the mountains and hills, large rock formations, native landscape, archeological and historical sites and significant washes.

*Water quality protection and flood prevention.* Natural washes retain flood waters and reduce flood damage. They can also provide valuable wildlife habitat, if protected in appropriate amounts and configurations. Groundwater supplies are replenished in places where water soaks into the soil and reenters aquifers.

*Agriculture.* Agriculture cannot remain financially viable without large open spaces in which they can be practiced. These landscapes are also an important part of the region's cultural heritage.

*Recreation.* Hiking, biking, horseback riding, hunting, fishing, camping, and bird watching are recreational activities that require extensive open spaces and natural areas.

*Sense of place.* Many of the things that help define Pinal County's character are associated with open space, including agriculture, historic structures, and scenic vistas. Open spaces provide areas of visual relief by providing areas without new human construction.

*Education.* Functional open spaces provide areas to learn about the ecological connections among people, wildlife, and the land.

#### **11.4.2 Criteria for Open Space Designation**

The plan (Figure 1, *Proposed Open Space and Trails Plan*) was based on the County's resource opportunities and constraints; and public, stakeholder, and County staff input. The proposed open space areas identified on the plan are based on protection and connectivity of the following items identified during the in-depth analysis of the County's natural and cultural resources.

*Riparian and Mountainous Areas* - The Gila, San Pedro, and Santa Cruz Rivers were identified as the three most important riparian corridors throughout the County, and deserve the highest priority for preservation. In addition the mountainous areas such as the Pinal, Superstition, Black, Dripping Springs, Sierra Estrellas, Tortilla, San Tan, Santa Catalina, Table Top, Palo Verde, Casa Grande, Sacaton, Sawtooth, Sameniego Hills, Picacho Mountains, and Tortolita Mountains indicate a high level of biodiversity and high habitat values and should be preserved.

*Open Space Connections* - A network of wildlife movement corridors were established to connect the Coronado National Forest to the Tortolita, Picacho, and Black Mountain areas. Additionally, connections were established to existing

open space corridors within the municipalities of Florence, Casa Grande, Apache Junction, Queen Creek, and Maricopa.

*Open Space Buffers* - Buffer areas around the Ironwood Forest National Monument, Superstition Wilderness Area, Tonto National Forest, Coronado National Forest, Aravaipa Canyon Wilderness Area, and the Sonoran Desert National Monument were established to further protect these natural resources. Additionally, significant natural and cultural resources are present on the bajadas surrounding these National Forests, Monuments and Wilderness Areas. Bajadas are important for maintaining ecological integrity throughout the County because they generally provide high-value habitats for both plant and animal species. Extending the range of these National Forests, Monuments and Wilderness Areas to include the bajadas, provides another level of protection to the County's natural and cultural resources.

*Regional Connectivity* - The plan also provides regional connections through open space areas and open space corridors to already existing open space areas in adjacent counties. Providing regional connectivity to these already existing open space areas in adjacent counties with the existing or planned open space areas within Pinal County creates a regionally connected network of open space areas.

#### **11.4.2.1 Open Space Designations**

Four open space designations are identified on the plan that address—previous planning efforts of other entities, existing or future land manager operational activities, and the planning efforts of this study. The following is a brief description of the identified designations as seen on Figure 1, *Proposed Open Space and Trails Plan*.

##### *Existing/Planned Open Space*

Existing or planned open space areas such as the national forests, monuments and wilderness areas are identified on the maps, as well as open space areas identified by municipalities.

##### *Existing/Planned or Proposed Regional Parks*

Existing or planned regional parks are regional parks that have been identified from previously adopted county or municipal plans. Proposed regional parks are those areas that were identified through this master planning process and are discussed below.

##### *Restricted Use Open Space*

Restricted use open space areas allow limited access to the public for recreational purposes due to the land manager's operational activities. It is the land manager's responsibility to secure the area and provide notifications and signage for the public when the property is not available for public use.

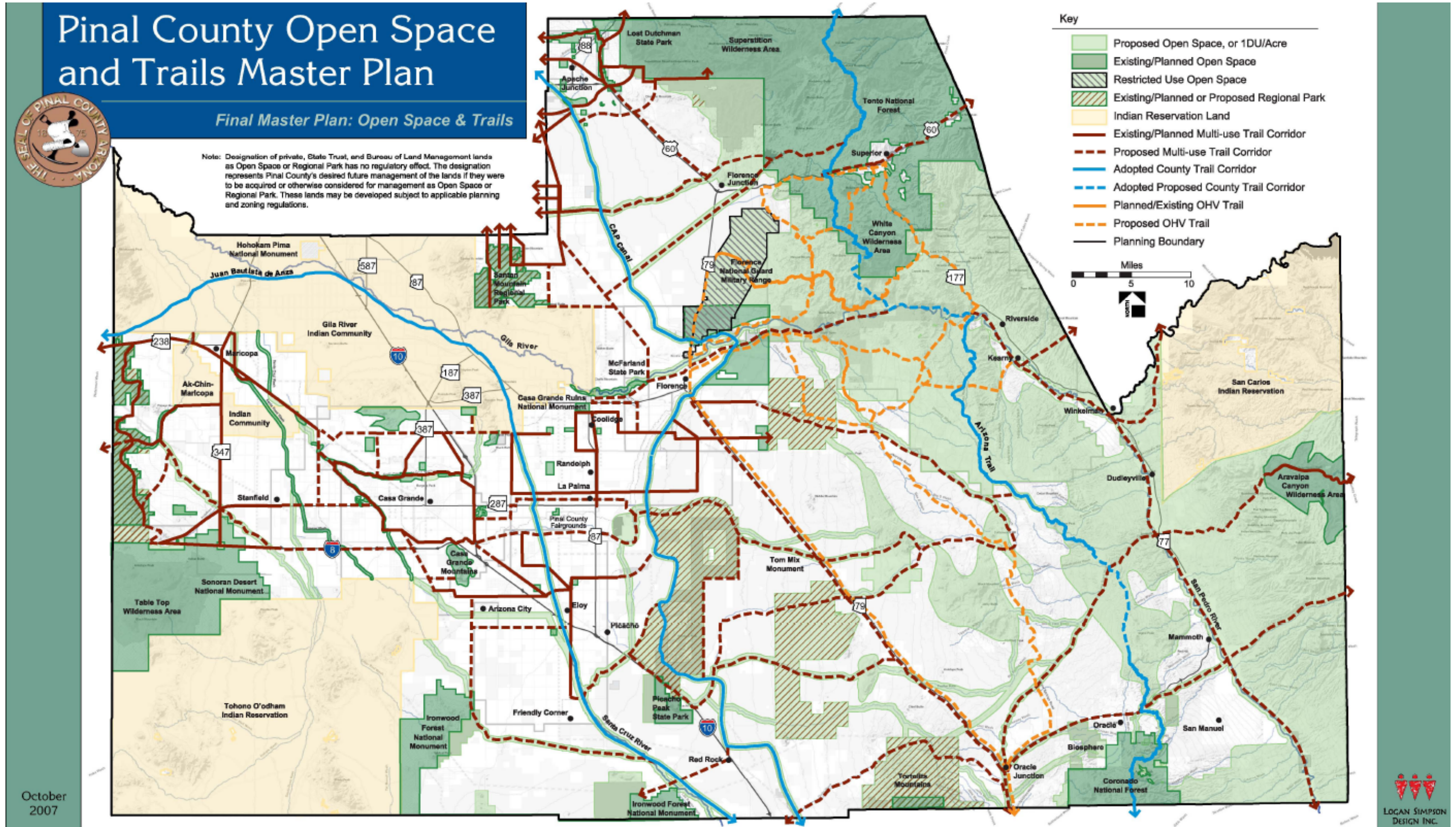
*Proposed Open Space*

Proposed open space areas are those areas that had not been previously identified by any entity as existing or planned open space.

Of the 3,439,736 acres within Pinal County, The open space is comprised of the following percentages of the above mentioned open space designations:

- Existing/planned open space = 399,300 acres (12%)
- Existing/planned or proposed regional parks = 168,700 acres (5%)
- Restricted use open space = 25,900 acres (1%)
- Proposed open space = 802,400 acres (23%)
- Total open space and regional parks = 1,396,300 acres (41%)

Figure 1. Proposed Open Space and Trails Plan



#### **11.4.2.2 Open Space and Private Property**

The open space designated on the plan identifies the desired future condition for open space. The designation of private, State Trust, Bureau of Land Management and Bureau of Reclamation lands shown as proposed open space in the plan has no regulatory effect. The designation represents the desired future management of the lands if they were to be acquired or otherwise considered for management as open space. These lands may be developed subject to applicable County's planning and zoning regulations.

There are numerous preservation techniques to enhance the network of open space areas (see Section 11.7, *Open Space Preservation Techniques*). The extent to which open space can be added to the public domain or protected depends on the availability of the acquisition/preservation techniques and the public's commitment to financially support such actions.

#### **11.5 Trails**

Providing equitable access to the County's resources through an interconnected multi-modal trail network ensures a variety of passive and active recreation opportunities. The foundation of the trail system shown on the plan relies on the framework of the four regional trail corridors.

Connections were established to link all existing or planned trail networks within and adjacent to the County and to planned or existing municipality trail systems. Connections were provided to all natural recreation areas including National, State and County parks, National Monuments and Forests, and Wilderness Areas within the County. These connections were developed using drainage ways, and both paved and unpaved roads, and public infrastructure. Required trails may be located within utility corridors when the managing agencies allow.

#### **11.6 Goals, Objectives, and Policies**

The goals, objectives, and policies presented in the Open Space Acquisition and Preservation Element serve as the County's guide for existing and future park facilities and open space. The supporting objectives and policies serve the County as guidelines for implementation activities, which will aid the County in reaching its desired vision.

The goals of the Open Space Acquisition and Preservation Element are:

***Goal 1:***

***Develop a connected system of open space areas that protect and conserve natural, physical, cultural, and social resources.***

**Objective OS1: Identify, preserve, protect, or conserve areas of critical habitat and high habitat value and wildlife movement corridors as open space.**

Policy OS1.1 Adopt special regulations for development in areas of critical habitat and high habitat value, and in wildlife movement corridors.

Policy OS1.2 Explore implementation of flexible zoning techniques that promote open space preservation and protection of natural resources and critical habitats.

Policy OS1.3 Encourage density transitions to separate rural from urbanized areas and to buffer preserve areas from urbanized areas.

Policy OS1.4 Provide contiguous open space through close coordination between development projects.

Policy OS1.5 Require developers and other land owners to plan for key contiguous open acre areas, corridors and/or linkages during the zoning stage.

Policy OS1.6 Develop land preservation techniques to acquire and preserve open space.

Policy OS1.7 Develop a management plan to maintain and enhance the desired type and level of wildlife habitat within the County's regional park and open space areas.

Policy OS1.8 Develop a wildfire management plan for the County's regional park and open space areas to minimize hazardous conditions in the natural and built environment.

Policy OS1.9 Develop open space and trail standards and criteria to provide sufficient buffer zones relative to roadways, river and wash corridors, critical habitat, sensitive lands, and development areas.

Policy OS1.10 Consider development standards for hillsides and other environmentally sensitive lands that allow development standards and infrastructure to respond in an innovative manner to topography, drainage, critical habitats and other land sensitivities.

**Objective OS2: Identify, preserve, protect, or conserve the existing natural drainage system.**

Policy OS2.1 Identify the significant natural washes and develop a county wide storm water management plan that preserves the significant natural

washes and adopt development regulations to implement the storm water management plan.

Policy OS2.2            Develop a watershed management plan that protects the County’s key contributing areas to promote water quality and conservation for future generations.

**Objective OS3:        Identify, preserve, and protect cultural resources that have cultural significance and provide a link to historic events.**

Policy OS3.1            Promote and provide incentives for subdivisions to conserve cultural resources within the county.

Policy OS3.2            Enhance community awareness and increase public support of local cultural opportunities.

Policy OS3.3            Explore agreements with landowners in cultural and historic areas to ensure appropriate use and preservation of cultural and historical resources.

**Goal 2:**  
***Develop a safe, multi-use trail system that provides connectivity throughout the county and to adjacent recreational areas.***

**Objective OS4:        Provide for a wide range of nonmotorized and motorized trail usages including hiking, equestrian, mountain biking, and off-highway vehicles.**

Policy OS4.1            Provide multi-use path and trail corridors for connectivity throughout the County.

Policy OS4.2            Provide for a safe separation of non-motorized and motorized trail networks and corridors.

Policy OS4.3            Develop trail standards that ensure compatibility with the natural environment, existing land uses, and a variety of users, as well as provides for the safety of all.

Policy OS4.4            Establish linkages between open space areas, regional parks and trails, schools, employment centers, shopping centers, and state and federal recreational areas.

Policy OS4.5            Provide for public access to all trails by coordinating with public agencies and private developers to ensure that appropriate public trail connections and access points are planned, constructed, and maintained.

- Policy OS4.6 Encourage and promote the benefits of volunteer labor and material donations for trail development and maintenance.
- Policy OS4.7 Establish a management plan for the development and upkeep of the County's trail system and coordinate trail development and on-going maintenance as part of the County's CIP and operational budget process.
- Policy OS 4.8 Seek opportunities to designate and/or construct trails on lands already under public ownership.
- Policy OS 4.9 Establish methods for public trail acquisition, design, construction, and maintenance that maximize alternative funding opportunities and community support.

***Goal 3:***

***Develop an accessible, comprehensive park system that provides a balance of passive and active recreational opportunities for County residents and visitors.***

**Objective OS5: Identify, protect, and conserve countywide opportunities to meet future park and recreation demands.**

- Policy OS5.1 Develop a coordinated process to prioritize land acquisition, design, and the construction and operation of all new park facilities in the County.
- Policy OS5.2 Identify specific park, open space, and trail amenities and their timely implementation to provide the service level desired by county residents and visitors.
- Policy OS5.3 Develop design standards for the renovation of existing and construction of new parks, open space, and trails in Pinal County.
- Policy OS5.4 Encourage development projects to designate, provide, and coordinate public access to public open space, parks, trails, conservation areas, foothills, and mountains.
- Policy OS5.5 Integrate parks and open space needs into the County's Capital Improvement Program (CIP).
- Policy OS5.6 Develop passive recreational activities which are sensitive to the natural environment.

Policy OS5.7 Encourage developers to identify and protect key contiguous open space areas, corridors, and/or linkages during the master planning stage and the plan review process.

Policy OS5.8 Evaluate all new park equipment and site amenities to minimize safety hazards.

Policy OS5.9 Ensure a frequent schedule of park maintenance and safety inspections.

**Goal 4:**

***Improve the quality, quantity, and design of open space, park lands, and trails in new residential development.***

**Objective: OS6: Develop guidelines for park, open space, and trails for new residential developments.**

Policy OS6.1 Require developers to meet the park land and facility demands for neighborhood and community parks created by new development.

Policy OS6.2 Implement Growing Smarter and Growing Smarter Plus legislation policies to protect the county's open space.

Policy OS6.3 Develop standards and development criteria for integration of park land, open space, and trails into new residential development.

Policy OS6.4 Develop standards for construction and maintenance of parks and trails to ensure long term usability.

**Goal 5:**

***Encourage coordination and cooperation between adjacent municipalities, agencies, jurisdictions, and the public in open space, park, and trail development.***

**Objective OS7: Build relationships among municipalities, county, state, and federal agencies, landowners/managers to provide recreation and open space opportunities.**

Policy OS7.1 Create a coordinated process to maximize municipal, county, state, and federal recreational plans and resources.

Policy OS7.2 Coordinate with the Bureau of Land Management and Arizona State Land Department for the designation, disposal, management, and acquisition of lands under their management in Pinal County.

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- Policy OS7.3      Coordinate the location of future parks, open space, and trails with the other agencies and jurisdictions within Pinal County to ensure connectivity and best use of resources.
- Policy OS7.4      Seek opportunities for easements, dedications, joint use agreements, and/or other appropriate methods with other public agencies, jurisdictions, and/or private property owners.
- Policy OS7.5      Develop a management plan that identifies responsible parties for operating, maintaining, and enforcing the appropriate usage of the county's regional parks, open spaces, and trail corridors.
- Policy OS7.6      Develop public education and outreach programs to assist in the development of the *Open Space Acquisition and Preservation* Element of the Comprehensive Plan.

### 11.7 Open Space Preservation Techniques

There are numerous techniques and strategies communities and agencies utilize in securing open space and trail corridors for future generations. These techniques and strategies may be achieved through three general approaches that include regulatory techniques, acquisition techniques, and influencing land management decisions by property owners and managers.

### 11.8 Implementation

The Implementation Plan identifies measures that can be used to implement this element. While some of the activities require actions for a specific period of time, most will require on-going cooperation, coordination, and communication between public and private agencies, as well as citizens and other concerned interests.

<i>Open Space Action Plan</i>		
<b>Action</b>	<b>Description</b>	<b>Lead Responsibility</b>
Cost Analysis	Conduct a cost analysis on priority open space.	Parks, Recreation, and Fairgrounds/ Planning and Development
Funding Options	Explore feasibility of funding techniques for acquisition of priority open space, park land, and park improvements.	Parks, Recreation, and Fairgrounds/ Planning and Development
Zoning Ordinance	Where feasible, update and revise the zoning ordinance to include development standards for sensitive lands and open space and park land requirements.	Planning and Development
Subdivision Regulations	Where feasible, update and revise the subdivision regulations to include development standards for sensitive lands and open space and park land requirements.	Planning and Development
Interagency Coordination	Begin coordinating meetings between governmental entities and stakeholders.	Parks, Recreation, and Fairgrounds/ Planning and Development
Impact Fee Assessment	Update the impact fee ordinance to meet the level of service criteria required for new development.	Parks, Recreation, and Fairgrounds/ Planning and Development