



## **SAVE THE DELLS' POSITION STATEMENT**

### **Opposing the Proposed Widening of State Route 89 Through the Granite Dells Narrows**

The Granite Dells is something really special, and we must be on our guard to make sure it stays special. State Route 89 passes through a beautiful part of the Dells, and it is the only highway from which people can see this beauty up close from their cars. This is the part we're calling the "Dells Narrows." It's barely over one mile long.

The City of Prescott is considering an opportunity to widen the Dells Narrows to a five-lane expressway to accommodate more traffic during those short periods when commuters are heading to and from town.

We believe that retail, industry, medical and jobs will be expanding to the north near the airport where thousands of homes are going in. The subdivisions in which the homes are being built did set aside land for such uses. This should moderate future traffic through the Dells.

Why spend millions of taxpayer dollars to destroy a scenic byway just to save a minute or two of travel? There are many more acceptable ways to enhance safety without blasting the Dells.

### **Background on the City's Proposed Project**

In June 2021, the Prescott City Council heard about the plans to start the multi-year program to improve the wastewater system (the centralization project), the underground utilities, and the roadway of State Route 89 (SR89) between Phippen Trail and Willow Lake Road. The proposed project included a number of interrelated infrastructure changes in the Dells stretch, including SR89 widening to five lanes.

Centralization is a series of projects intended to locate the city's wastewater operations to the Airport Water Reclamation Facility. The wastewater project includes the installation of a new effluent storage tank located near the Watson Lake Park entrance, the installation of a new effluent line along the 89 roadway from the new tank to Kieckhefer Ranch, and conversion of an existing 24" effluent line.

The city reasoned that if the wastewater improvements would disturb the roadway, the roadway could be widened as part of the same project.

This project was introduced again to the council and public during the [June 27, 2023, City Council Study Session](#). This time, a preliminary concept was presented, which included blasting the rock in the approximately one-mile Dells Narrows, to add two more lanes plus a center lane. At this time, the public was formally invited to learn about the project and provide feedback at [sr89improvements.com](http://sr89improvements.com), the main outreach tool.

## Widening is Not Necessary

The only necessary component of the plan is to improve the effluent system as part of a centralization project. At the “close proximity” open house held on September 6, attendees were told by city spokespersons that the lines could be placed below the road shoulders with NO WIDENING NECESSARY.

City statements have greatly inflated wait times at intersections and the occurrence of congestion on the road. *Our sampling and experience show that this section is handling traffic quite well except for an early morning half-hour commuter congestion that adds a minute and a half to the transit time.*

The usage-rate projections into 2045 for this part of SR89 are debatable. With upcoming population growth to the north of Pioneer Parkway, there will be proportionate commercial development that will establish shopping opportunities there, thus reducing southbound traffic.

- The city must refuse requests from developers to change commercial zoning to residential zoning, which places the burden on the citizens of Prescott to fund roads to the south to accommodate norther residents seeking services.
- Employment travel will shift north. Those residing in the new northern developments are not likely to include a large number of central Prescott workers.

## Widening Through the Narrows is a Bad Idea

The iconic Dells Narrows of SR89 is a uniquely scenic and historic stretch of highway and an important part of the Granite Dells experience. With the current concept for widening, this scenic Narrows would become a sanitized five-lane expressway and a gravely damaged historic foyer into the City of Prescott.

- Traffic capacity has long been secondary to a roadway's scenic and historic importance. Americans are quite content to go slow(er) on iconic two-lanes such as the Pacific Coast Highway, Route 66, Utah's Highway 12, Route 64 along the South Rim of the Grand Canyon, State Route 89 through Oak Creek Canyon, and historic 89A through Sedona. SR89 through Yarnell will be reduced from four to three lanes.
- Many segments of SR89 are two-lane roads.
- This portion of SR89 is part of the Granite Mountain Hotshots Memorial Highway and part of Historic 89, once Arizona's main north-south border-to-border roadway.

- Adoption of the concept presented to the City of Prescott at the June study session, includes [blasting the rocks along the roadway](#) (start at 39:32 in this study session recording), moving them, and *possibly coloring them and adding artificial rock*.

The proposed concept will cost taxpayers a bunch. The amount stated at the June 27 study session in Table 35 is \$8.6 million, but at the end of the study session at 1:26:50, in response to a question, Deputy Public Works Director Gwen Rowitsch says that they "have programmed in \$26 million, with \$11 million for wastewater centralization and **\$15 million for roadway**."

Aside from the commuter constituency, the real beneficiaries of widening are developers that need to avoid the traffic impact obstacle to their future developments.

- Prescott taxpayers shouldn't be expanding roadways so that others get to create more traffic.

The road widening proposal is not for the greater good of the City of Prescott.

- We think the City of Prescott should have higher priorities for its citizens, such as public safety staffing and new fire station, replacing and repairing aging infrastructure, and addressing water quality issues.
- A wider road through this segment of the Dells potentially means higher speeds and more accidents involving people and wildlife.
- A wider road would endanger motorists turning onto SR89 from side streets and driveways because of more lands to maneuver across.

## There are Alternatives

We agree that motorists living and driving this stretch of highway have safety concerns and experience delays getting out onto SR89 from roads that intersect it. Some experience slower-moving traffic during certain morning hours.

However, we think safety improvements can be made without widening the roadway through the Dells Narrows.

- Minor changes, such as installing smart traffic lights and additional merge lanes could improve these intersections without widening or blasting any rocks.
- The city needs to seek out and evaluate alternatives and compare them publicly with ecological, social, economic, cultural, and scenic aspects in mind.

## City Transparency is Lacking

We object to the fast pace imposed on the public for this project. The concept was developed without any public input and did not include any alternatives to widening or discussions about alternatives.

We want the Prescott decision-makers to put our future first, listen to community concerns, and commit to working toward a shared vision of this road without compromising our quality of life and the unique features of our city.

- Any proposed actions need to be supported by experts in these areas and include serious analysis and cited research. The council shouldn't accept recommendations without this process and a full public review before a set of realistic options is presented.
- Disappointingly, the recording of the June 27, 2023 Study Session reveals "done deal" statements such as, "Time is of the essence," "It's comforting to know that a lot of this work can be done without a lot of public concern," and "We really need to move forward on this."
- On June 22, of this year, the majority of the Executive Board of the Central Yavapai Metropolitan Planning Organization (CYMPO), the road and transportation planners for our region, voted to *demote* this project (start watching [at approximately 1:31](#)) on the legislative funding request list, citing among other things, ***a lack of appetite for the predicted public resistance to widening the road!***

Using Central Yavapai Metropolitan Planning Organization's data is not sufficient.

- Traffic studies are needed that separate incidents at roundabouts from straightaway incidents and that distinguishes time-of-day counts from each other. Accident data needs to be reported according to cause (impaired driving, falling asleep at the wheel, wildlife collisions, medical emergencies, etc.) which are not related to road width or traffic congestion.
- Traffic data newly added to the Virtual Meeting Room of the city's [sr89improvements.com](#) site has no references.

An open house "for those in close proximity" was held on September 6<sup>th</sup>, and the ONLY general public open house is scheduled for October 4<sup>th</sup>. The open house format prevents meaningful dialog with city and agency staff and blocks attendees from hearing and learning from each other.

The city survey, offered to the public at the open house, online, and on paper potentially leads the public to a certain desired outcome. The choices given are restrictive and leading.

- Giving the opportunity to make other comments doesn't remedy the bias in the first questions.
- "Allowing" only one survey per household acts directly against fair speech penalizing couples, multi-adult families, multi-housing tenants, and house-sharers.

- The last date to submit comments is November 10<sup>th</sup> of this year, which is just five months after the concept was introduced and BEFORE the newly elected council is seated.

## The Bottom Line

We suggest the City of Prescott Leadership recognize that overwhelmingly its citizens do not want a five-lane expressway through the Dells. Widening is not necessary to accomplish the wastewater upgrades, doubling traffic capacity is currently unnecessary, and it is doubtful it is needed for the future.

Blasting our scenic two-lane entrance to Prescott and the Dells into an expressway would be an irreversible disaster that wouldn't benefit Prescottonians, but the loss would be at their expense. Centralization and traffic safety concerns can readily be accomplished without widening.