



Our Opinion: Saguaro Natl. expansion must beat local growth

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Saguaro National Park must expand before development gobbles the last of its surrounding desert. But that won't happen unless Arizona resolves a constitutional Catch-22.

Congress already has approved Saguaro's expansion by 2,465 acres of Arizona state trust land, but the Arizona Constitution doesn't allow swaps of state land with other governments.

State trust lands can only be sold to the highest bidder. But the federal government can't buy land from other governments.

Because a federal policy change isn't likely to be made anytime soon, Arizona should amend its Constitution to permit land swaps that benefit the entire state.

The state also will need a full-court press by our congressional delegation.

Even when Congress approves park expansions, it can take a decade for Congress to appropriate funds to buy the land.

For Saguaro National Park, there's little time left to lose.

Land approved in 1994 to augment the park's Tucson Mountain District to the west was developed before it could be bought.

And particle-board palaces now are popping up throughout the park's Rincon Mountain District to the east.

Arizona's fast growth, coupled with the appeal of the beautiful open desert around Saguaro National Park, lends an extraordinary urgency to our need for a constitutional amendment and federal land appropriations.

Tucson is blessed to have these two expanses as our city's bookends.

Indeed, the park's rich saguaro forests, prime wildlife habitat and incredibly diverse flora constitute a very special holding for all Americans.

That's why Saguaro, which had been made a national monument in 1933, was upgraded to a national park in 1994.

As of last month, however, 915 acres comprising 33 private parcels had been approved for Saguaro's expansion but not purchased.

U.S. Reps. Raúl Grijalva and Gabrielle Giffords, both Tucson Democrats, now are sponsoring a bill to add another 583 acres.

Nothing will be added, though, without federal appropriations, a change to the state constitution or both.

Appropriations for added parks lands are extremely competitive in Congress.

But Arizona now has some added clout, with Grijalva serving as chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks, Forests and Public Lands.

We urge our entire delegation to lobby hard on behalf of this bifurcated park.

Very few things could be more important to Arizona than the preservation, enrichment and expansion of Saguaro National Park.