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Watson Woods acreage eyed for conservation easement in 'Forever Preserved' initiative



Prescott Creeks Executive Director Michael Byrd, left, talks to a tour group on Tuesday, March 19, 2024, about the restoration work that has taken place over the past 29 years on the Watson Woods Riparian Preserve, a 126-acre parcel that borders Granite Creek along Prescott's Highway 89 corridor. The non-profit organization has launched an initiative called "Forever Preserved" to promote a conservation easement on the land to preserve it in perpetuity. (Cindy Barks/Courier)

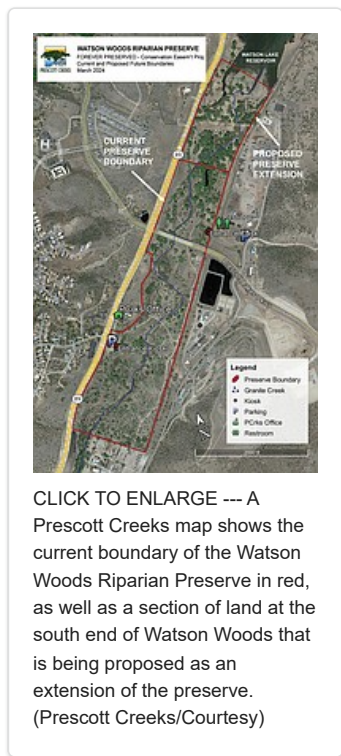


By Cindy Barks | [Twitter](#) Cindy_Barks

For nearly three decades, 126 acres of leafy cottonwood and willow forestland that lines Granite Creek south of Watson Lake has been preserved as the Watson Woods Riparian Preserve.

Owned by the City of Prescott and managed by the non-profit Prescott Creeks organization, the preserve has been formalized under two consecutive 25-year leases — the first of which ran from 1995 to 2020, and the second that is in its fourth year.

Now, an effort called “Forever Preserved” is underway to preserve that designation in perpetuity.



For the past year or so, officials with the city and Prescott Creeks have been discussing the possibility of a conservation easement that would take in the current 126 acres of the preserve, as well as a parcel that directly ties into the southern tip of Watson Lake.

Prescott Creeks Executive Director Michael Byrd points out a conservation easement would not just ensure that the unique piece of land would be forever preserved from development, but it would also open up more federal funding for the maintenance and continued restoration of the woods.

He describes a conservation easement as “a voluntary legal instrument that a property owner can place on a parcel of land to protect the conservation values for all time.”



that provides mitigation credits to permittees under Section 404 of the U.S. Clean Water Act, would allow that work to continue and be expanded.

Byrd, who has been involved with Watson Woods since 1995-96 when he wrote the first management plan as his senior project as a student at Prescott College, told a recent tour group at Watson Woods, "The first 25 years went really quickly, so we know the second 25 years is going to go very quickly."

He added, "We have an opportunity right now where we have a funding source that could bring millions of dollars to continue managing and restoring this place. But one of the requirements is that we have to have, in perpetuity, protection on the project site. We are working with the City of Prescott right now to make that happen."

To make the community more aware of Watson Woods and Prescott Creeks' work there, Byrd conducts regular tours of the preserve. Recently, more tours and presentations have been taking place as the Forever Preserved initiative has been gearing up.

On Tuesday, March 19, a group of nine participated in Byrd's tour, which took in the South Loop Trail, located near the preserve's trailhead at the intersection of Highway 89 and Rosser Street. Along the way, Byrd pointed out the variety of trees and other plant life, and told the group about the work that has occurred to help the land and the creek recover from the harmful effects of sand-and-gravel mining that once took place there.

"'Forever Preserved' is our public outreach component," Byrd told the group. "We're trying to let folks in the community know what we're doing and what's at stake. Ultimately, the City Council makes that decision (on the conservation easement)."

Prescott Public Works Director Gwen Rowitsch noted this past week that the city is working with Prescott Creeks on the issues that relate to the conservation easement.

For instance, she pointed out that the preserve land contains numerous pieces of city infrastructure, including water and sewer lines, as well as Prescott Lakes Parkway and the bridge over Granite Creek.

Rowitsch said the discussions have focused on creating "exclusion zones" that would exclude the public infrastructure from the conservation easement.

"The council would have to agree," Rowitsch said of the conservation easement, noting that the move would essentially be relinquishing control of the city-owned piece of property. "It's a forever thing," she said.

Byrd agreed that Watson Woods contains many utilities and public infrastructure, including city elements, as well as power lines and natural gas lines.

"We have a history of working with the city on those types of issues," Byrd said. "The conservation easement would set some limits on what can and can't be done."

Creek water before it reaches Watson Lake — a long-time goal of Prescott Creek and the city.

The pieces of green infrastructure “use nature to clean the water as it moves downstream from our urban core,” Byrd said of the wetlands projects.

The matter is still in the discussion phase, and it is tentatively scheduled to go to a Prescott City Council study session on May 28.

Follow Cindy Barks on Twitter @Cindy_Barks. Reach her at 928-445-3333, ext. 2034, or cbarks@prescottaz.com.

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