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In support of Senate Bill No. 358

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Good morning Mr. Chairperson and members of the committee. My name is Brett Riddle and I am a Professor of Biological Sciences at the University of Nevada Las Vegas.

I would first like to thank the good people of the town of Blue Diamond for their efforts to protect Red Rock Canyon. However, I want to make it clear that I am not, nor have I ever been, a resident of Blue Diamond. Rather, just like most of us in this room this morning, I live in a high-density urban neighborhood in the Las Vegas Valley.

At 5,500 homes, along with shopping centers and gas stations, Mr. Rhodes has a plan for turning much of the Blue Diamond Hill into an equally high-density urban environment.

Why should any of us be concerned that such high-density development is being planned for the eastern flank of Red Rock Canyon?

We already have a protected Conservation Area that includes large expanses of Joshua tree, yucca, and black-brush covered desert bajadas and arroyos; bordered on their western edge by vertical cliffs rising into pinion and juniper woodlands, and harboring in their depths unique and delicate streams lined with cottonwoods and willows.

So why should it matter if countless rows of houses, supermarkets, and gas stations begin to sprout on eastern flank of Red Rock Canyon?

I would like each of you to consider the concept of a neighborhood:

The urban neighborhoods we live in work well when they include the appropriate complement of things we need—houses, schools, stores, and fire stations.

Likewise, ecological neighborhoods work well when the different parts—plants, animals, soils, and waters—are healthy and contribute to the integrity and stability of the whole.

Ideally, natural features of the geological and biological landscape should define an ecological neighborhood. Often however, legal boundaries don't follow those natural features.

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SUBMITTED BY: Dr. Brett Riddle

The Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood is delineated naturally to the east by a very obvious boundary—the abrupt escarpment that separates the relatively flat expanses and high-density urban neighborhoods of the Las Vegas Valley to the east from the hills, mountains, and canyons of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood to the west, including Blue Diamond Hill, the Hardie Gypsum mine, and the high-density urban neighborhood proposed by Mr. Rhodes.

Aldo Leopold—the father of wildlife conservation—proposed a very modern and wise land ethic and ecological conscience. He had this to say about the mix between ethics, aesthetics, and economic expediency in land-use planning: “A thing is right only when it tends to preserve the integrity, stability and beauty of the community, and the community includes soil, waters, fauna, and flora, as well as people. It is wrong when it tends otherwise.”

What will it take to preserve the integrity, stability, and beauty of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood? We don’t have all of those answers yet, and there are controversies (for example, over how many wild horses and burros can be accommodated).

But what we can address more readily are the related aesthetic qualities that represent the expectations of Las Vegas citizens and visitors when they enter the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood.

If you look at this photo, taken from about half way around the Scenic Loop, you will see a desert hillside topped with evidence of a history of mining, with a network of tracks in this sunlit area coming down almost to the bottom of Red Rock Canyon.

So far as I can tell by looking at published maps, these tracks lay mostly on the mine land purchased by Mr. Rhoads. Please note that this network of roads can be seen from nearly all vantage points along the Scenic Loop.

Yesterday morning, I was starting to walk up the White Rock trailhead, not far from where this photo was taken. At exactly 7:30 a.m. I heard a loud blast. When I turned around, what I saw was this entire saddle lying above these tracks blanketed in an enormous cloud of white dust. It was an amazing site, but by 7:40 a.m., the dust cloud had vanished and I was again looking at a scarred, but still intact, desert landscape.

If any portion of this scene eventually becomes a part of a high-density urban neighborhood, the rows of houses, supermarkets, and gas stations will not vanish in the blink of an eye. The ecological neighborhood of Red Rock Canyon will have been penetrated by a far greater disturbance than is represented by the mining operations. The countless visitors to Las Vegas—and the tour company operators that make a living guiding them through Red Rock Canyon—will need to learn to look in another direction if they want to imagine they are visiting a still intact wild landscape.

We who live in the high-density urban neighborhoods of the Las Vegas Valley recognize the need for the kinds of developments that we occupy. We realize that for a variety of reasons, a lot of families want to move to Las Vegas and need well-designed neighborhoods and affordable housing.

But many of us also share Leopold's land ethic and ecological conscience, and that dictates that we embrace the integrity, stability, and beauty of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood.

Do not make the mistake of thinking of this area as just one of many similar places in the Mojave Desert. The geological and biological diversity of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood is unmatched elsewhere in the vast Mojave Desert.

This is why for example, many people are excited about prospects for a new Oliver Ranch Environmental Education Field School in Red Rock Canyon—designed to teach the next generation of citizens and land-use planners about biological diversity, and grow in them an even stronger land ethic and ecological conscience than our own generation tends to have.

But the concept behind this exciting educational resource—to transport these young people from the distractions of the city for a few short days—will be tragically undermined if the Ranch School becomes bordered on the east by a high-density urban neighborhood with supermarkets and gas stations.

We might have been very naïve in hoping we had a contract with the development community in Las Vegas that went something like this: build all the high-density urban neighborhoods you need within the confines of the Las Vegas Valley, but please incorporate a land ethic and ecological conscience into your regional master planning. Stop the high density developments at the obvious boundary set by the landscape itself—between the edge of the valley and western hills that mark the beginning of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood.

Mr. Rhodes has proposed a significant expansion of high-density development into the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood. With the prospect of 5,500 houses—along with services including supermarkets and gas stations—flowing down from Blue Diamond Hill toward the heart of Red Rock Canyon, his proposal represents an irreversible violation of the contract between the developers of our much needed urban neighborhoods and the citizens of the Las Vegas Valley who have a biological and aesthetic connection with Red Rock Canyon.

Finally, the well-known western author Edward Abbey once said that “the developers and entrepreneurs must somehow be taught a new vocabulary of values.” In my opinion, that

vocabulary must eventually incorporate the land ethic and ecological conscience of Aldo Leopold.

As we can see from Mr. Rhodes' proposal to breach the integrity, stability, and beauty of the Red Rock Canyon ecological neighborhood with a high-density urban neighborhood, we have not reached that desirable end-point yet. However, as members of the Nevada State Assembly, you have the opportunity right now to preserve the biological and aesthetic essence of Red Rock Canyon by voting for SB 358.