

Hilltop privy is a comfort to all

Our view: A portable 'loo' atop a hill heralds a sensible approach to the walkers-vs.-researchers impasse on Tumamoc

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High on a hill southwest of St. Mary's Hospital sits a brand new portable toilet. The presence of this basic facility, oddly enough, represents a major policy decision by the University of Arizona.

It means the university has agreed to allow hikers to continue to have access to Tumamoc Hill.

A week ago, there was no public toilet on the hill. University scientists who work up there were complaining about hikers leaving trash and human waste in the ecological preserve they've been studying for generations.

An editorial in the Star last Monday pointed out possible ways the scientists and walkers could co-exist.

Tumamoc Hill is a steep and popular spot for walkers and runners, southwest of St. Mary's and Silverbell roads. It's not a public park, but walkers have for years been using it as though it is.

The paved road rises rapidly among 869 acres of hilly terrain densely covered with saguaros and other desert plants. Where the pavement ends, a dirt road continues through a cluster of buildings called the Desert Laboratory.

In recent weeks, there has been tension between the scientists who work in these buildings and the throngs who walk the hill. The vast majority of the walkers are respectful of the terrain, but in any large group there's always a fraction who will leave trash around and act irresponsibly. Such behavior is particularly disturbing at Tumamoc Hill, which has been an ecological research station since 1903.

The vegetation on these slopes provides the longest continuous record of plant life in this region, thanks to the distinguished list of ecologists who have worked there.

Some of the most eminent names in desert biology of the last century have used, and in some cases directed, the Desert Laboratory. The list includes F.W. Colville, Daniel T. MacDougal, William T. Hornaday, Forrest Shreve, Howard Scott Gentry, and more recently, Paul Martin, Robert Webb, Ray Turner, Julio Betancourt and Janice Bowers.

Most of these names are obscure even to people around Tucson. But, obscure or not, the scientists associated with the Desert Laboratory have over a period of 100 years created a body of information about the Sonoran Desert that cannot be found elsewhere. Gradually, they put together the story of how plants live and die in the Tucson basin. It is work that enhances our understanding of the unique desert we inhabit.

We know of no one — especially among those who walk the hill — who thinks this work should be interrupted or infringed on by careless hikers. Which is why we think the UA and City

Councilman José Ibarra, who represents the area around Tumamoc Hill, deserve a round of applause for developing a compromise solution.

The UA came up with a plan that will keep the road open to the public in the early morning and evening hours during the week and all day on weekends. While the details remain to be worked out, the plan calls for the road to be closed during the business day, from roughly 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. when vehicles are using it.

In the last week, the UA also installed the portable toilet at the end of the pavement near the Desert Laboratory. Once the UA formally announces its decision, Ibarra says he'll use funds from his Ward 1 "Back to Basics" budget to create 22 parking spaces on Anklam Road near the entrance to Tumamoc Hill.

He said the free parking spaces will cost between \$10,000 and \$16,000. This is a good addition because St. Mary's Hospital recently raised objections to hikers using its parking lot. Also, walkers were using the Safeway parking lot east of the hospital, and crossing Silverbell Road at a dangerous point where it bends and narrows. The new spaces will eliminate the need to park in the Safeway lot and will improve safety conditions for the Tumamoc walkers.

The decision to keep the road open and improve access is a good example of what City Manager Mike Hein calls an "integrated solution." It should work well for the public and the research scientists on the hill.