

Desert Lab may shut Tumamoc to hikers

Environment, safety are concerns for UA



FEBRUARY 09, 2006 12:00 AM • BY ERICA MELTZER ARIZONA DAILY STAR

The University of Arizona and its Desert Laboratory may put restrictions on hikers who climb Tumamoc Hill because of safety and environmental concerns.

Uncertainty about the future of the popular hiking path prompted the city to delay creating a parking area on Anklam Road to make up for some of the parking lost when St. Mary's Hospital told walkers they could no longer park there.

In a Jan. 18 letter, Desert Laboratory Director Jay Quade urged the city to forget about the parking improvements.

Quade said the university "may eventually decide to limit pedestrian traffic on Tumamoc Hill" and warned that expanding parking could "precipitate such decision."

But Jaime Gutierrez, UA assistant vice president for community relations, said Wednesday the university supports more parking and has no plans to close the hill to hikers.

Gutierrez called the letter "significant" because it reflects how frustrated researchers are with walkers but said it doesn't reflect the university's position.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the integrity of the Desert Laboratory while playing host to a rapidly expanding population of hill walkers," Quade wrote in the letter. He also cited safety concerns. Cars and walkers share one narrow road.

Quade is out of the country until mid-March, and Gutierrez said no changes are likely until after he returns. One possible change would be limiting walkers to early morning and evening hours.

Gutierrez said most hikers are responsible, but there have been serious problems. Walkers have urinated and defecated on laboratory buildings, threatened researchers who asked them to stay on the road, and even thrown a flashlight at a car, he said.

"I don't foresee the closure in the immediate future," Gutierrez said. "That's not to say that if it got much worse, it would not be considered, but I don't think the university considers that an

option at this point."

Freda Johnson has met a small group of friends to walk up Tumamoc Hill several times a week for the last couple of years.

A consultant specializing in conflict mediation, Johnson enjoys the peace and quiet of her early morning walks and would hate to see the road closed to walkers.

"That would be very disappointing," she said. "On a certain level, I consider it public property, though I understand the university owns it."

Lynne Taylor, who runs a bird-watching tour business, said the Desert Lab has not responded to efforts by walkers to get trash cans and portable toilets installed.

"We are so grateful for the privilege of walking there, and we have tried to work with them," she said. "They have the right to do what they want, but I feel like their immediate reaction is just to close it."

Gutierrez, himself a walker, said some researchers are concerned added amenities will add to the impression that the lab is a public park.

"For the researchers, there is a concern about the integrity of Tumamoc," he said. "Like many places, we love it to death."

Councilman Jose Ibarra, whose ward includes Tumamoc Hill, had proposed creating 22 parking spaces on the south side of Anklam Road between Silverbell Road and the entrance to the hill at a cost of roughly \$10,000.

"It's not really a city issue, but we wanted to help our constituents who enjoy walking on the hill," Ibarra said. "We're trying to work together to solve the problem."

Ibarra said he won't push ahead with the parking until he gets the go-ahead from the university. But Gutierrez said the university supports the parking plan.

"St. Mary's had hundreds of spaces, but you didn't have 500 people walking up the hill," Gutierrez said.

"It is becoming increasingly difficult to maintain the integrity of the Desert Laboratory while playing host to a rapidly expanding population of hill walkers."

Jay Quade

Desert Laboratory director