COMMUNITY TAKE-AWAY

Deschutes South Canyon: Grow Smart, Keep the Best

Highlights of the Green Space Evaluation of Opportunity Area 9
Prepared by Save Bend Green Space, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, November 2026

The short version

Bend is growing, and the Deschutes South Canyon (the riverside land between the Deschutes River and Brookswood Boulevard in southwest Bend) has been zoned for housing since 2016. **Residential development here is inevitable,** but we want to make sure it happens in the right places. We performed a detailed evaluation that found a few parts of this land are **so valuable** to the community that they should be **protected for good**. The rest can be built on carefully.

~131 acres	1+ mile	166,000+	9+ miles	130+
of riverside land	of river frontage	trail visits in six months	Major & secondary trails	Bird species recorded

How we studied the land

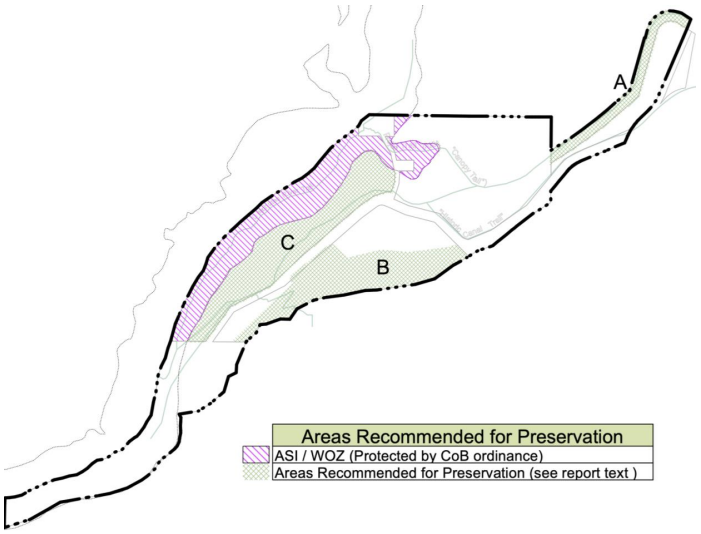
Volunteer teams walked the property in ten sections, evaluating trails, plants, birds, trees, viewpoints and historic features. They combined that fieldwork with aerial photos, city maps, geologic maps and trail-use counts. Each section was rated from 1 (very low value) to 10 (exceptional) on eight measures. **The property scored 8 or higher on every criterion**, with perfect 10s for public access, recreation and wildlife connectivity.

Why this land matters

- **It is a park in everything but name.** Three popular trails cross the site: the Deschutes River Trail, the Central Oregon Historic Canal Trail and the shaded Canopy Trail. People walk, run, bike, ski, sled, climb and watch birds here all year. Trail counters recorded more than 166,000 visits in just six months of 2016, and use has grown since, as Bend has.
- **It serves neighbors who need it most.** Nearly one in three nearby residents is 65 or older, some nearby neighborhoods have children in more than 60% of homes, and in one nearby area one household in six has no car. For many, this is the only natural area they can walk to.
- **It is a highway and habitat for wildlife.** The river and the historic canal give animals water and cover as they move between the city, the river's edge, and national forest land beyond. Mule deer, river otters, bobcats, bald eagles and songbirds all use it.
- **Its old trees can't be replaced.** The site holds huge ponderosa pines (exceeding 30" diameter), many over a century old. Big trees do far more than their numbers suggest: in similar forests, the largest 3% of trees store about 42% of the carbon.
- **It tells Bend's story.** The 1905 Pilot Butte Canal, built by Alexander M. Drake, runs through the site, along with an old stone quarry, exposed basalt rimrock, volcanic ash cliffs and the Tumalo fault line.

Our approach: build in some places, protect the best

Steep slopes, river protections and challenging geological formations limit where homes can go; only a portion of the site is suitable for development. Beyond the riverbank zone the City already protects, we identified **three areas of highest value** that should be kept free of development and shielded from construction damage:



Green crosshatch: areas recommended for preservation. Pink: riverbank zone already protected by City of Bend rules. The Deschutes River runs along the upper-left edge.

Area A Canopy Trail and the Old Pilot Butte Canal

A shaded trail beneath giant ponderosa pines, following the 1905 canal. Neighbors use it daily as a natural extension of Blakely Park. It could become a history-and-nature park that adds value to any homes built nearby.

Area B Volcanic cliffs and rimrock passage

Home to the "tuff cliffs," layers of ancient volcanic ash. The steep, unstable ground is hard to build on anyway, and it gives wildlife a sheltered route between the canal trail and the river.

Area C Between the open canal and the river

A narrow strip of big pines and an historic tuff quarry that shields the riverbank below. It is too narrow for a road, an existing major trail, and homesites; It would be a “dead end” limiting fire access. Construction here would wash debris down the slopes toward the river.

What we recommend

1. **Build only on the open upland areas** that the City does not already classify as sensitive land and keep construction away from rimrock and volcanic cliffs.
2. **Protect Areas A, B and C** permanently, along with the riverbank zone already protected by the City.
3. **Leave the protected land out of the housing math.** City rules set a minimum number of homes based on a site’s acreage. Counting land that can’t be built on would force an unreasonable number of homes onto the rest.
4. **Give the protected areas a caretaker.** We recommend transferring them to Bend Park and Recreation District to maintain the trails and vegetation over the long term.

The bottom line

Bend can add homes here and still keep the parts of this canyon that make it special. Protected green space would make the new and existing neighborhoods better places to live, too. **Once these trees, trails and wildlife paths are gone, they cannot be brought back**, so the choices made now will matter for generations.

Read the full report at savebendgreenspace.org