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A Dark Sky Oasis in Metro Phoenix Achieves International Recognition

FOUNTAIN HILLS, Ariz. and TUCSON, Ariz. (8 January 2018) – Fountain Hills, Arizona has been awarded the rare distinction of being designated an International Dark Sky Community by the International Dark Sky Association (IDA). It is one of only two International Dark Sky Communities located near a major metropolitan area. In total, only 16 communities in the world have previously earned this prestigious designation.

“Today’s announcement of the accreditation of Fountain Hills, at the edge of one of the country’s most populous urban centers, is an important moment for the movement to preserve dark skies in the American West,” said IDA Executive Director J. Scott Feierabend. “Given the explosive growth of Western cities in recent decades, this outcome is a significant and hopeful sign of progress.”

Long known for having one of the world’s tallest fountains at 560 feet, its backdrop of the Sonoran Desert mountains, its many great festivals and its mountain preserve, Fountain Hills has adopted a mission to preserve another of its natural assets, its dark sky.

“The Town of Fountain Hills is proud to join the other communities in the world that have been awarded this distinct honor,” said Mayor Linda Kavanagh. “Town leaders have supported the concept of a darksky community since the town’s incorporation in 1989.”

A dedicated group of citizens began pursuing the designation nearly three years ago. The resulting formation of the Fountain Hills Dark Sky Association (FHDSA) was triggered by the advent of bright white LEDs, similar to the very bright white xenon headlights of some newer cars.

“We realized that if actions weren’t taken soon, our town would begin to have a night sky glow just like the rest of the Phoenix metropolitan area,” said Nancy Bill, FHDSA Co-Chair. “If that happened, we would no longer be able to enjoy the wonders of the night sky and the effect would be detrimental to both humans and wildlife.”

Nighttime exposure to blue-rich light can lead to health issues. A 2016 American Medical Association report cites a growing body of scientific evidence that this kind of light exposure affects sleep patterns, which can lead to a wide range of health problems.

Not just humans are affected. “Millions of birds are killed every year because of the disorientation caused by light pollution,” said FHDSA Board member Amberleigh Dabrowski. “Migrating butterflies suffer the same fate for the same reason.”

Because of the effort of the FHDSA and the support of the town council and town staff, the outdoor lighting and sign ordinances were updated to address new causes of light pollution.

“We have already updated most of our municipal lighting with dark sky-friendly fixtures,” said Town Manager Grady Miller, “and it turns out that the energy savings covers the initial investment in just a few years.”

FHDSA Board Member Ted Blank, a NASA Solar System Ambassador and co-founder of the Fountain Hills Astronomy club, agreed that the town’s strategy has worked. “It really is possible to do astronomy here,” he said. “These dark skies enabled Charles Juels, a Fountain Hills resident and noted amateur astronomer, to discover 475 new asteroids, one of which he named Fountain Hills.”

The local astronomy club, in cooperation with the library, offers monthly star parties to introduce people to planets, constellations, and extraordinary stellar objects. Three telescopes were donated to the Fountain Hills Library by FHDSA Board Member Dr. Craig Gimbel so they can be checked out just like books. This program resulted in a national award for the library.

“The most important point we emphasize is that we do not suggest that anyone have inadequate or no lighting at all,” explained FHDSA Co-Chair Joe Bill. “We only ask that outdoor lighting be shielded to avoid light trespass and that it be a warmer color temperature. LEDs are fine, just not the bright white ones.”

A key focus of IDA and the Dark Sky Communities is to educate citizens about light pollution’s destructive effects through presentations, literature, news items, and dark sky festivals. Fountain Hills is planning its first dark sky festival for April 21, 2018. Looking even further into the future, plans are underway to potentially bring a privately funded public observatory to Fountain Hills. That’s when some serious stargazing will excite kids and adults alike, spark imaginations, teach science, and inspire thoughts about our place in the cosmos.

About Fountain Hills

The Town of Fountain Hills is home to about 24,000 residents and is located between the dramatic McDowell Mountains and the Verde River on the northeastern edge of the Phoenix, Arizona metro area. The community is known for its scenic beauty, excellent schools, hiking and biking trails, quality of life, and world-famous fountain. Fountain Hills was named by Phoenix Magazine as the best place to live in the Valley of the Sun and was cited as “a welcome oasis on the outskirts of a metropolis.” Several hundred thousand people visit every year to attend its festivals and to view the fountain and the hundreds of publicly displayed sculptures.

About IDA

The International Dark Sky Association, founded in 1988, is a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization and the leading global authority combating light pollution worldwide. IDA advocates for the protection of the nighttime environment and dark night skies by educating policymakers and the public about night sky conservation and promoting environmentally responsible outdoor lighting. IDA established the International Dark Sky Places conservation program in 2001 to recognize excellent stewardship of the night sky.

Designations are based on stringent outdoor lighting standards and innovative community outreach. Since the program began, 17 Communities, 57 Parks, 11 Reserves, three Sanctuaries and four Dark Sky Friendly Developments of Distinction in 16 countries throughout the world have received International Dark Sky designations. More information about IDA and its mission may be found at darksky.org.

Media Contacts

(this is old contact information that was valid at the time of designation)

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