

BORREGO'S DARK SKIES

How Did Borrego Springs become the World's Second International Dark Sky Community?

By Maris Brancheau

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“Save Our Sky!” This handwritten mandate on a 2008 note of endorsement for the designation of Borrego Springs as an International Dark Sky Community says it all. Even more poignant, the note was written by a local developer —

Dan Wright the owner of The Springs at Borrego RV Resort.

The early support of businesses and developments in the Borrego Springs community helped to fuel the lighting changes and lighting awareness needed for Borrego Springs to become the second International Dark Sky Community in the world and the first in California. A group of concerned citizens, led by local astronomers and an astronomer from Palomar Observatory, as well as representatives of the Anza-Borrego Desert Natural History Association, Anza-Borrego Desert State Park, and the Anza Borrego Institute (part of Anza Borrego Foundation) met regularly for two years starting in 2007 prior to submitting a formal application to the International Dark-Sky Association (IDA), based in Arizona, for an official review of the merits of designating Borrego Springs as night-sky friendly.

The idea came from local astronomer Dennis Mammana, who at that time had been a Borrego Springs resident for four years. Mammana attended a meeting of the IDA when the organization had only named one town as an International Dark Sky Community.

“It was clear to me that such a designation could have far-reaching benefits for our town, so I brought the idea back to town and got a meeting together... It was received quite well— much better than I thought it would be—and it just took off,” Mammana recalled.

The first application was submitted on May 14, 2008. The volunteers, who then went by the name of Borrego Springs Dark Sky Task Force, worked tirelessly to survey the local lighting and provided ten examples of projects that were built with proper lighting—minimal lights with

lumens under 4050, lights that are fully shielded with fixtures, lights with motion sensors to limit night-time light trespass, and lights that don't impact nighttime sky views.

The coalition also worked with San Diego Gas & Electric to shield two streetlights on Palm Canyon Drive that did not meet good lighting standards because they flooded the sky with light and were not properly shielded. The lack of residential streetlights in Borrego Springs helped to show the IDA why the desert village should be designated as one of the darkest communities in the world.

More than 25 Borrego Springs-based and outside interested agencies signed on in support of the original application, including County Supervisor Bill Horn, the Borrego Springs Chamber of Commerce, Village Association, Sponsor Group, and School District. Several of the regional astronomy groups that frequent Borrego Springs because of its stellar night skies also supported the initiative. An additional 165 individual supporters signed the application, as well.

But, having dark skies and widespread support and awareness for the need to preserve them wasn't enough. The first application was denied, and the Coalition answered the IDA's original concerns with a resubmission submitted in January 2009. One of the main changes included working with the Borrego Valley Airport to shield a new beacon light that was creating light pollution across the valley and into the skies all night long. The Airport and the San Diego County Airport group that manages it eventually heard the call and provided shielding for the beacon light and reduced the lumens by more than 75 percent. The 91-page reapplication included a full lighting survey of the ten original projects submitted to show that Borrego Springs businesses and organizations were committed to keeping their properties free from light pollution. The ten buildings surveyed for the IDA application were: Borrego Valley Inn, Boys & Girls Club, Borrego Sun Newspaper Office, Borrego Springs Chamber of Commerce, Borrego Springs Little League Field, St. Barnabas Episcopal Church, Borrego Lutheran Church, Borrego Springs Post Office, Borrego Springs Middle School, and XL Gas Station.

Did you know the Milky Way is visible right in downtown Borrego Springs? The Coalition wanted to make sure the IDA was aware and with help of night-time photographer and Coalition Member Dennis Mammana, a photograph of the Milky Way as visible from Christmas Circle was provided with the application.

The announcement came on July 31, 2009. Borrego Springs was named the second International Dark-Sky Community in the world. The town celebrated the designation with the October 24, 2009, Borrego Days festival celebration called, “Starry Starry Night.” Mammana was honored as the parade’s Grand Marshal that year. A formal ceremony was held that same afternoon at the Borrego public library. Kim Patton of the International Dark-Sky Association, headquarters in Tucson, made the official presentation to the community. Over one hundred community members attended, as did a representative of Flagstaff, Arizona—the first Dark Sky Community in the world, and legislative representatives from the state and county. A proclamation presented by San Diego County Board of Supervisors and other official documents can be seen on display at the library.

Interestingly, as of this writing more than seven years later in 2016, Borrego Springs is still the only Dark Sky Community designated in California. Twelve communities throughout the world have been added since Borrego Springs earned its designation, including small towns in Scotland, Canada, Indiana, and Texas. The IDA also designates official Dark Sky Parks (Anza-Borrego Desert State Park is a prime candidate) and Reserves, Sanctuaries, and planned communities who plan their lighting to protect from light pollution can earn “Developments of Distinction.”

With the goal of an official title as Dark Sky Community, the task force didn’t just disband and stop the important work of sky preservation in Borrego Springs. The group continued to meet and developed pamphlets and an information-laden website: www.borregodarkskies.org to keep residents, business owners, and newcomers to the valley informed about the designation and what it means for future lighting in the valley. The original Task Force members were: Scott Kardel, Betsy Knaak, Joan Malone, Dennis Mammana, James Rickard, Grace Rickard, Sally Theriault, and Sam Webb.

Further, the group became the Borrego Springs Dark Sky Coalition and most of the original members continue to work on dark sky awareness. In addition, Coalition Members Dorothy Hogan, Christopher O’Keefe, Maris Brancheau, Clark Volmar, and Jean Volmar support the efforts. Important components have been lighting

surveys at local businesses, stargazing programs for the public, and the Dark Sky Friendly Business Program. Starting in 2014, the Coalition has awarded certificates in a formal presentation to those local businesses who are doing their part to reduce light pollution. In recognition of their responsible lighting practices, 21 local businesses have been named a Night Sky Friendly Business.

The work of preserving the view of the night sky isn’t over in Borrego Springs. The skyscape is 50 percent of the beauty and the splendor experienced when visiting our small community. Now that you know why and how Borrego Springs became an International Dark Sky Community, please join our efforts to keep the community free of light pollution and to preserve the awesome experience of one of the best nighttime views in the world.

Find out more about San Diego County lighting standards, recommended outdoor lighting fixtures, Borrego Springs’s Dark Sky Coalition, and how you can help, at www.borregodarkskies.org.

