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Land Board unanimously votes to auction off Cougar Island in Payette Lake, over county objections

- Posted by Betsy
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Idaho's state Land Board voted unanimously today to proceed with an auction of Cougar Island in the middle of Payette Lake, over the objections of Valley County commissioners, who said they'd like to look into ways to raise funds for a public purchase of the iconic island to protect its recreation and scenic values and the water quality of the lake.

"It is extremely difficult for public entities to participate in the auction process," Commissioner Sherry Maupin told the Land Board, which is chaired by Gov. Brad Little and also includes the attorney general, secretary of state, state controller and state superintendent of public instruction. "Cougar Island is a historical gem of Valley County," she said, long available for public access and recreation. Maupin said the area's economy rests on tourism and recreation, and pleaded with the board to find a way to accomplish both its goals – maximum long-term returns for the state endowment, whose largest beneficiary is the state's public schools, as required by the Idaho Constitution – and the local community's goals, including preserving and enhancing its environment and economy.

A letter to the Land Board signed by all three county commissioners said, "Selling such beloved lands – enjoyed by generations of Idahoans – would be a permanent and irreversible black mark in our state's decorated history

of conserving special places so that future generations can share those same places and experiences. The weight of losing the island will not just be carried by those of us lucky enough to be elected leaders, but by all future generations of Idahoans."

The Land Board first voted in 2018 to auction off Cougar Island. The state Department of Lands has divided the island into five lots, one of which is currently leased to a cabin owner. That lessee, Jim Laski of Bellevue, has repeatedly applied to participate in an auction to purchase his lot, something the state has been encouraging as it tries to get out of the business of leasing state endowment lands for cabin sites, seeking better-earning investments instead. The state already has auctioned off 140 of its 168 leased cabin sites on Payette Lake.

Laski told the board his family has treasured the 10 summers it's been using the property, and has taken care to take a light touch, never renting it out, never using fertilizers, and never establishing lawns or other non-native plantings to preserve the lake's water quality.

Land Board staff told the board they plan to auction off the five lots individually, and also the island as a whole, and even offer the option of two halves. "We'd offer it in various ways, and whichever one generates the most revenue is the winner," Josh Purkiss, real estate services bureau chief, told the board.

Mark Bottles, a real estate broker whose firm has run multiple public auctions for the state Lands Department, said not all of the five lots are suitable for development or septic tanks, and the state likely could make

more money by selling the whole island to someone who wants it as exclusively theirs.

Laski said he's paid for multiple appraisals now and filed paperwork repeatedly for auctions that haven't proceeded; he pleaded with the board to stick with its planned July 30 auction date at least for his lot. He noted that the August 2021 state-conducted appraisal he paid for, which would expire if the auction doesn't go forward this summer, came at the peak of values, so the state endowment would be selling high. When state-owned cabin sites are auctioned, the appraisal is the starting bid. Laski also said he's been working with United Payette on possible plans for public ownership or conservation of the remainder of the island outside his lot.

But the board voted unanimously, with no discussion, to reaffirm its 2018 decision to auction off the island, giving the department staff the go-ahead to proceed as they choose; department staff said they're now eyeing September for the auction. Afterward, a disappointed Laski said, "We'll see what happens. They'll probably get some rich Californian to buy it."