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Selling endowment lands is a loss to the public. State departments should buy them

BY RICK JUST UPDATED JUNE 24, 2022 5:37 AM

Here we go again. Another iconic piece of Idaho is about to become a vacation homesite for some billionaire. The Idaho Land Board has determined that the best use for Cougar Island, in the middle of Payette Lake, is as a site for one or more moneyed individuals to call their own. The public will lose access and likely endure the sight of a cabin on steroids designed to elicit the maximum amount of envy from mere mortals.

Cougar Island is part of the of 2.4 million acres of endowment land the state of Idaho owns. Those lands were granted to the state by the federal government at the time of statehood. They are “endowment” lands because they were meant to provide an ongoing source of revenue for Idaho schools.

The decision to sell Cougar Island is theirs, but the Idaho Land Board has little choice in the matter. According to Article IX of Idaho’s constitution, Idaho’s endowment lands are to be managed “... in such manner as will secure the maximum long-term financial return....” Selling lands at market value or trading them for lands of equal or better market value can fulfill that constitutional mandate. Unfortunately, the framers of Idaho’s constitution did not foresee that one day the highest and best use of such lands might not always be an economic use.

Many endowment fund lands are prime property for public recreation. We should conserve other lands for their environmental or aesthetic value. But how do we preserve those properties without removing much-needed school funding?

The state of Idaho should undertake a study of endowment fund holdings to identify prime public recreation property and property of great value for ecosystem protection in its natural state. Once identified, the Idaho Legislature, which currently has more money than it knows what to do with, could appropriate funds over several years to purchase those properties at market value to be managed by the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation or the Idaho Department of Fish and Game. It may seem counterintuitive for the state of Idaho to purchase property from itself. But this is one way to protect the economic legacy of endowment fund land while moving the property under an agency better designed to manage it for recreational or conservation values.

In eastern Idaho, a 40-acre plot of endowment fund land was recently closed to the public because of abuse by ATV users and indiscriminate campers. The Idaho Department of Lands has no authority to manage the land for recreation and little experience in doing so. It’s not their job. If the land were purchased for management by Fish and Game or Parks and Recreation, they could solve those issues and retain public access.

Preserving access to public lands is an issue that cuts across party lines. Enjoying Idaho’s great outdoors is why most people choose to live here. It’s time for the Legislature to solve this problem with a win-win for Idaho residents

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