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Star-News

McCall: No new homes allowed on Cougar Island

Local zoning laws in effect if state holds auction

BY DREW DODSON

The Star-News

The current zoning of Cougar Island on Payette Lake would not allow any more homes to be built if the island is sold at auction by the Idaho Department of Lands, the McCall City Council was told last week.

The island is zoned for one home per 10 acres and there is already a home on the 14.2-acre island, but the IDL plans to accept bids for five lots it platted on the island in 2014.

That means whoever buys any of four vacant lots on the island at an auction tentatively set for Boise on Sept. 8 would not be able to build on them, McCall City Attorney Bill Nichols said.

“Just because the state says there’s five lots doesn’t necessarily mean there’s five lots,” Nichols said. “It’s already got zoning that applies.”

A letter informing the state of the current zoning was scheduled to be approved on Wednesday during a special meeting of the council. That action had not been taken as of the printing deadline for The Star-News.

The lands department prefers to sell the island as a whole, which real estate experts have advised would likely earn the most money at auction, said Sharla Arledge, a spokesperson for IDL.

The lands department is required by the Idaho Constitution to accept the highest bid at auction for Cougar Island, which is state endowment land managed to the benefit of public schools and other state institutions.

The IDL has previously stated that it is not bound to local zoning laws when it comes to the development of endowment lands around McCall or elsewhere in the state.

That policy was restated in 2018 when IDL leased state land on Deinhard Lane and Lick Creek Road for cellphone towers.

City zoning laws require cell towers to be disguised in order to blend in with their surroundings, but IDL said the cost of the disguises, such as artificial tree branches, would be too expensive for the companies leasing the land.

However, the Cougar Island lots would no longer be subject to the state policy if sold to private owners, McCall Community and Economic Development Director Michelle Groenevelt said.

“They (the lands department) can advertise what they want, but the actual development potential may be less than what they’re advertising,” Groenevelt said.

A home on the island built by Bellevue attorney Jim Laski, who has leased one of the five lots since 2012, would be the only one allowed by current zoning.

Laski requested the island be put up for auction to give him a chance to own outright the land under his house, which he currently leases from the state for \$34,000 per year.

If Laski’s bid for his 2.5-acre lot is not successful, the winning bidder must pay him for the appraised value of his home on the island. That value has not been set.

IDL officials said they would accept bids for the entire island or for individual lots.

The auction is the first action recommended by a state plan passed last year that would sell 377 acres of state land around the lake within 20 years.

Council members on Wednesday also were expected to approve a letter to Valley County commissioners urging them to forbid development on Cougar Island until an environmental study is conducted.

That action had not been taken as of the printing deadline for The Star-News.

Cougar Island is under Valley County’s purview, but is in the McCall Impact Area, for which the county adopts zoning laws that mirror those in place for city limits.

The impact area takes in all land around Payette Lake that is not within McCall City Limits, including Cougar Island and Shellworth Island.

The Process

State endowment lands can only be sold at public auction so that the lands department gets the most return as mandated by the Idaho Constitution.

Endowment land around Payette Lake has been leased for use as residential cottage sites as far back as the early 1900s.

In 2010, the state land board approved a plan to divest ownership of leased cottage site parcels to give lessees a chance to buy the land outright at auction.

Since 2010, 154 cottage site lots have been sold, including 127 lots that were leased. The auctions have raised more than \$66 million. Twenty leased cottage site lots remain.

Money from the land sales is deposited into a fund that the lands department may use to buy other timberlands in Idaho or invest in financial markets.

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