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Idaho's Land Board approves land exchange with developer

- By BETSY Z. RUSSELL brussell@idahopress.com, Sept. 20, 2022

BOISE – Top state officials on Tuesday approved a land exchange between the state and the Avimor development near Highway 55, which already includes hundreds of homes.

Idaho's state Land Board voted unanimously in favor of the exchange, which has been in the works for two years. Avimor will get title to scattered, 40-acre parcels of dry grazing land that are in the route of its development, and in exchange will deed over to the state endowment 800 acres of dry grazing land near the summit of Horseshoe Bend Hill.

Many of the current, scattered endowment parcels lack any legal access. The block of land atop Horseshoe Bend Hill all has legal access from a county-maintained road.

Plus, six neighbors of the Horseshoe Bend Hill property wrote to the Land Board in support of the exchange. All said they liked the idea of the property coming into state management, with grazing leases, and functioning as an "unmanaged state park," with public access and wildlife habitat.

"This particular location off Pearl Road has natural beautiful views of wildlife and the Treasure Valley," wrote neighbor Larry Limberg. "This land use would be a perfect fit for so many to this natural setting for healthy outdoor exercise."

Scott Phillips, policy and communications chief for the state Department of Lands, said there's not a specific state designation of an "unmanaged state park," but he added, "Almost all endowment land is open for public access for dispersed recreation, and we have no intention to do otherwise with the land acquired through this exchange – provided that folks don't go in and do a bunch of stuff that damages the resource. That's really the only time that we contemplate shutting things down, that and public safety."

The Land Board in 2020 voted to proceed with "due diligence" to see if the land exchange was feasible. Josh Purkiss, real estate services bureau chief for the Idaho Department of Lands, reported to the board Tuesday that the appraisals came in with a near match: The 800 acres of land the state endowment would get was appraised at \$2 million, and the scattered parcels of endowment land that Avimor would get were appraised at \$1.99 million; they total 796.5 acres. He said Avimor offered to donate the \$10,000 difference in values.

An analysis by the Land Board's real estate advisor, Michael Finch of CenturyPacific LLLP, said it "appears to be a true like-for-like exchange."

An appraisal conducted by Langston and Associates Inc. found both parcels had a highest and best use of agricultural dry grazing with areas of large acreage single-family residential development.

State Controller Brandon Woolf asked how current the appraisal was; it was completed a year and a half ago. But Purkiss explained why it's still valid: At first, the endowment parcels were only appraised at \$700,000, because of the lack of legal access. "However, because Avimor was absorbing this into their ownership and they have access, we asked the appraiser to take a look," and appraise the land "if it had access," Purkiss said. That resulted in the near-matching appraisals.

"So it's still a huge win," Purkiss said. "It's not necessary to have an updated appraisal, in my opinion, because of the significant benefits to the endowment on this exchange."

He listed benefits including "blocking up" endowment land that previously consisted of checkerboard parcels; adding legal access; and increasing value.

Woolf moved to approve the exchange, state schools Superintendent Sherri Ybarra seconded the motion, and it passed unanimously. The Land Board is chaired by Gov. Brad Little. Two of its members, Attorney General Lawrence Wasden and Secretary of State Lawrence Denney, weren't at Tuesday's meeting.

The only current state grazing lessee on the scattered parcels of endowment land is Avimor itself. And the company indicated it was fine with terminating its grazing lease on the parcels in the exchange, now that it'd own the land instead.

The scattered parcels are in three counties: Ada, Boise and Gem; Ada and Boise county commissioners indicated they're neutral on the exchange, while Gem commissioners supported it because of a slight increase to their tax base due to development at Avimor.

Avimor, first approved by Ada County in the early 2000s, already has roughly 700 homes built; hundreds more are planned, [reports our Idaho Press news partner KTVB](#). There also is a network of public trails for hiking, biking and horseback riding; parks, playgrounds, ponds and sports courts in the development; and a community center for residents, a gas station and a brewery. Long-term plans for the development call for villages and hamlets connected by trails, with open space and pockets of mixed uses including office and commercial space; in all, the planned community is envisioned to have about 10,000 homes by 2060.

The owners of Avimor, the McLeod family, have owned the land since 1916 as a family ranch, according to the [Avimor website](#).

"We're pleased that the Land Board has recognized the merit and value of this land trade, and we appreciate the Board's decision to approve the deal," said Dan Richter, Managing Partner for Avimor. "This exchange really works out for both parties by enabling the State to consolidate its ownership, while giving Avimor the ability to construct roads and water infrastructure and allowing unimpeded access to a network of our vast trails."

Avimor has requested annexation into the city of Eagle, a proposal that's aroused controversy there; the pending application was among topics addressed at an Eagle City Council town hall meeting Aug. 29.

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