

Star-News

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Management of state lands needs an overhaul

The Idaho Department of Lands held an auction last week, but nobody came. The silence that greeted the call of the auctioneer for Cougar Island in Payette Lake should be a loud and clear message that an overhaul is needed in the way state endowment lands are managed.

It was not surprising that no one bid on Cougar Island as a whole or any of its lots except for the person who already leases one of the lots, and he admits he likely will default on his bid. One reason was the unrealistic minimum bids placed on the lots based on a recent appraisal. A second reason was the fact that any successful bidders would have been unable to build anything on their lots once the parcels switched from state ownership to private. The land would then come under the purview of local zoning laws, which the state ignores, that forbid more than the one house already on the island.

But the most compelling reason the lots did not sell is the underlying mandate driving the management of state endowment lands in the Idaho Constitution. That mandate says there is no alternative except to raise the most money for state endowments that support public schools and state institutions. The Cougar Island debacle proved this mandate is no longer workable.

The State Land Board and the Idaho Legislature must find a way to change the mandate to allow for more flexibility, just as Colorado did when voters passed Initiative 16 in 1996. The Colorado State Trust Lands Initiative amended the state constitution that had a similar restriction to Idaho. The directive of the Colorado state land board was changed from obtaining the "maximum possible amount" to a directive to achieve "reasonable and consistent income (from the land)."

That simple change made all the difference in the way state lands in Colorado have been managed over the last 25 years. The forward-thinking people who drafted the initiative also included a section that directed the land board to place 300,000 acres of state and into a Stewardship Trust, which it manages to improve and enhance wildlife habitat, natural beauty, natural values and open space. As a result, dozens of parcels of land ranging from a few hundred acres to nearly 30,000 acres have been set aside under categories such as "rare plants," "geologic beauty," "open space," and "wildlife," terms that are quite foreign to current state land managers.

A similar constitutional amendment needs to be placed before Idaho voters and Cougar Island should be the first parcel placed into the new Idaho Stewardship Trust. If the legislature declines, then it is up to the groups that have organized to protect Cougar

Island and other state endowment land to gather the signatures necessary to place the measure before voters.

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