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Valley: Payette L. quality, state lands linked

Special study urged of key endowment parcels

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The Star-News

Protecting state endowment lands around Payette Lake would also protect the lake's water quality, Valley County commissioners told a panel of local officials on Monday.

"If you destroy the watershed, then you destroy the lake and it comes right on down to everybody," Commission Chair Elt Hasbrouck told the group.

The meeting was attended by representatives from the City of McCall, United Payette, the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, and the Payette Land Trust.

An auction held on Sept. 14 for Cougar Island in Payette Lake marked the first of many auctions recommended by an Idaho Department of Lands plan that could sell off nearly 400 acres of state land around the lake within 20 years.

Commissioners requested Monday's meeting to talk about steps that can be taken to protect state lands before more auctions are held.

Hasbrouck urged the group to meet again to agree on which parcels of state land are the most important to protect. No date has been set for that meeting.

"It can't be just a small group making these decisions," he said.

One idea discussed during the 45-minute session was for the county to designate key parcels as "areas of critical concern."

The designation, already a part of county planning and zoning law, would require an environmental study before any development application could be submitted to the city or county.

"That's a local decision, so that's something we can control," said Craig Utter, executive director for the Payette Land Trust and a steering member for United Payette.

In August, commissioners declined a request by the McCall City Council to place the "critical concern" designation on Cougar Island leading up to the Sept. 14 auction.

The commissioners were worried about interfering with the auction and said it was too late to apply the designation since five lots have already been platted on the island by the state.

One Bid Received

The lands department received only one bid at auction for the 14.2-acre island, which was offered as individual lots or as a whole.

Bellevue attorney Jim Laski placed the \$2 million minimum bid for a 2.5-acre lot he has leased from the state for nearly 10 years.

However, Laski said after the auction that he could not afford the minimum bid. He has since offered the lot and the home on for sale for \$3.8 million, according to an online listing.

If anyone other than Laski had bought the land at auction, they would have been required to pay him \$1.6 million for the value of his home.

Laski was an eligible bidder in the auction because he agreed to pay administrative fees upon closing and also paid for two appraisals of the island leading up to the auction, IDL spokesperson Scott Phillips said.

Anyone else who wanted to bid on the island at auction was required to submit a \$50,000 deposit.

The online listing for Laski's home says any sale must close by mid-November, which matches the timeline Laski is required to close on his purchase at the Sept. 14 auction.

If Laski is unable to close on the purchase, he will have the option to continue leasing the land from the lands department. His current lease for the lot expires at the end of the year.

If Laski renews his lease, he would pay \$81,000 per year for the 2.5-acre lot, or double the \$40,000 per year he currently pays, Phillips said.

It is unknown what will happen to the four other lots on Cougar Island, none of which received bids at the auction in September.

Options will be presented at a future meeting of the state land board, which is made up of the state's top elected officials who oversee the lands department.

The Payette Land Trust and United Payette raised over \$1 million to bid on Cougar Island at last month's auction, but did not bid because no bids were placed on the island's four vacant lots.

The Process

Valley County has jurisdiction over many endowment lands around McCall because they are within the McCall Impact Area, which was created under a 1977 agreement with the city.

The county adopts zoning laws for the impact area that mirror those in place for city limits, but decision-making authority for private land in the impact area rests with the county commissioners.

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

Publication Date: Thursday, October 20, 2022

State endowment lands, proposals explained

When Idaho became a state, Congress gave it lands to be managed for the sole purpose of funding a specified list of beneficiaries, primarily public schools.

The mandate written into the Idaho Constitution says the lands will be managed "...in such manner as will secure the maximum long-term financial return to the institution to which (it is) granted."

Most of the money earned by these lands comes from logging, but the state also earns money through leases for grazing, farming, communication sites, renewable energy, recreation, mineral rights and residential/commercial real estate.

Endowment lands in the City of McCall and around Payette Lake in the McCall Impact Area amount to 5,357 acres, or about 3.5 times the size of Ponderosa State Park.

There are a total of 183,411 acres of endowment land in the Payette Lakes Supervisory Area, which spans Adams, Boise, Gem, Idaho, Valley and Washington counties.

A plan adopted by the State Land Board last year could see nearly 400 acres near McCall developed within the next 20 years.

The larger portion, including many of the lands fronting the north end of Payette Lake, do not have a timeline for development.

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