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McCall joins United Payette task force

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The Star-News

IDL, Payette Forest mum on land swap talks

The City of McCall will join a task force formed to evaluate proposals that would make state endowment lands around Payette Lake part of the Payette National Forest.

Last week the McCall City Council accepted an invitation to join the group, which is being assembled by United Payette, a local advocacy group focused on preserving public land around Payette Lake.

Council member Julie Thrower was appointed to the task force by fellow council members during last Thursday's meeting.

"I definitely would be interested," said Thrower, who has an environmental law practice in McCall. "Obviously, I do have an interest in these issues."

In 2021, the Idaho Department of Lands and Payette Forest began discussing a proposal that would swap 16,125 acres of state endowment land around McCall for 30,895 acres of Forest Service land in Adams County.

The current status of that proposal is unclear. Brian Harris, a spokesperson for the Payette Forest, said the agency had "no update" on the 2021 proposal as of Tuesday.

Meanwhile, Sharla Arledge, a spokesperson for the lands department, said "IDL continues to analyze possible land acquisitions."

Julie Manning, a steering committee member for United Payette, said forming the task force is part of the group's long-term plan for preserving endowment lands around Payette Lake.

"We've begun working on longer-term strategies, which include a potential exchange of land between IDL and the U.S. Forest Service," said Manning, who also serves on the task force.

The task force includes retired employees of the Idaho Department of Lands, Forest Service, Idaho Fish and Game, and the Idaho Department of Parks and Recreation, according to United Payette.

The group plans to conduct a survey to gauge public opinion on a potential land exchange, though there is no current timeline for the survey to be released, Manning said.

"In an early meeting of the group, it was determined that a survey around the idea of an exchange could be valuable in understanding the importance of conserving these lands in their current condition," she said.

Other goals of the task force are to share information with elected officials, work with the lands department to maintain access, and provide public information.

Task force meetings will be “internal” to United Payette and not open to the public, Manning said.

2021 proposal revisited

The possibility of a land exchange between the Payette Forest and the lands department was first raised in 2021 when the state was developing a plan for endowment lands surrounding Payette Lake.

The plan, known as the Payette Endowment Land Strategy, is intended to guide the lands department’s management of 5,357 acres of state endowment land around Payette Lake.

The land exchange broached in 2021 by the agencies would have included 96% of the land covered by the Payette strategy, or 5,140 acres.

Another 11,000 acres not covered by the state’s plan were also included in the preliminary discussions, including endowment land east of Bear Basin, north of Payette Lake, and east of Tamarack Bay near Fall Creek.

Not included in the preliminary talks were Shellworth Island, Cougar Island and endowment parcels closest to McCall, like an 80-acre state parcel on Deinhard Lane.

At the time, both agencies cited potential benefits to the land exchange, including better access to existing lands owned by the agencies and increased logging profits from lands department timber sales.

Discussions on the potential land exchange began shortly after the lands department rejected a land exchange proposed by Trident Holdings of Boise.

Trident’s proposal sought to trade 21,241 acres of timberland in northern Idaho for 21,378 acres of state endowment land around Payette Lake.

Over 10 years, the state projected it would lose nearly \$400 million in overall value, factoring the rapid appreciation of land in McCall compared to the rest of the state.

Endowment lands are managed by the lands department to maximize long-term profits per a mandate in the Idaho Constitution. Money from the lands is used primarily to fund public schools.

United Payette was formed in 2021 and is made up of 22 organizations representing over 60,000 members. For more information on the group’s work, visit www.unitedpayette.org/