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Teton County, Idaho commissioners poised to oppose selling 160 acres in billionaire's sights

Overwhelming public opposition shapes commissioners' forthcoming position.

- [By Christina MacIntosh / Environmental Reporter](#)

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Teton County, Idaho, commissioners on Monday showed interest in objecting to a state trust land sale in Teton, citing community opposition to the sale.

The public has expressed their disapproval through emails, public comment and a petition with over 1,400 signatures.

“It’s obvious to me that the community is against this,” Commission Chair Brad Wolfe said. “I don’t have a big feeling one way or the other, except that I represent the community and there’s just been overwhelming consensus that they don’t want this to happen.”

The Idaho commissioners’ letter to the State Board of Land Commissioners is due Sept. 19. They plan to discuss and approve a draft at their Aug. 26 meeting.

Idaho Department of Lands staff attended Monday’s county commission meeting to discuss the sale and invited the commissioners to attend the land board’s September meeting to voice their opinions directly to decision makers.

A [unified response](#) from Teton County, Idaho, rather than input from each commissioner, would hold more weight in the land board’s decision-making process, said Jim Elbin, the department’s trust land division administrator.

At issue is a 160-acre piece of land called the Driggs 160 parcel that the Beards, a multi-generational ranching family, lease for cattle grazing. Last month, the state land board voted to sell the parcel, due to the low returns of the grazing lease and the high potential for a lucrative sale given its location in booming Teton Valley. A local landowner, thought to be [billionaire Thomas Tull](#), requested that the state sell the parcel.

The state’s perspective

As it stands, the state makes just under \$1,000 per year leasing the parcel to the Beards. It anticipates selling the land for over \$1.4 million, Elbin said. The land board's mission is to generate as much revenue as possible for its beneficiaries, primarily public schools. Driggs 160 has been an "underperforming asset for a long time," said Ryan Woodland, the land department's area manager for eastern Idaho.

"I wish grazing paid the bills," Woodland said. "But unfortunately in this case it doesn't, so we have to look at other options to do our job."

Roger Hall, real estate bureau chief for the land department, agreed that he would "much prefer to lease."

Hall and Woodland said that the department is generally looking to acquire and hold onto land that generates revenue through leases, rather than sales.

"I don't want anyone to have the perception that we're looking to sell off ground," Woodland said.

Commission's conundrum

Wolfe, the Teton County, Idaho, commission chair, said that it "makes total sense" that the land board would like to sell Driggs 160.

"On the other hand, we've got a list of 1,400 people already who have asked us not to sell," Wolfe said.

"It's a big list," Commissioner Ron James added.

Department of Lands staff told the commissioners that the sale is not imminent and that the land board could reconsider the sale in light of comments from the county.

"They're going to go through the process with good faith and they're going to take it seriously," Hall said.

There's still a lot of due diligence to do before the parcel can be put on the market, Elbin said. Despite the interest from a specific landowner, the parcel still has to be publicly auctioned.

"Nothing says we have to advertise it tomorrow or in three months," Elbin said, adding that the approval of the land board merely gives the department permission to sell it.

Public opposition

At Monday's commission meeting, at least 10 residents spoke against the sale during public comment. Many expressed displeasure with the community's shift away from agriculture and residents being pushed out.

"We're a community. I'm part of this community. Let's help each other out and keep the land open," said Nick Beard, who took over the grazing lease after his father passed away in 2021. "Help me keep raising cows here in this community."

This sentiment was echoed by other members of the public.

"The Beards contribute to the rural and agricultural character" of the county, said Victor resident Kate Koons. "That's why a lot of us live here."

"I hope we continue to choose community over the highest bidder," she added.

Jade Kruger, of Teton, said that the commission should be "supporting heritage family agriculture."

'A big enclave'

Mike Merigliano, a Driggs resident, said he would like to see the state hold onto the land, but that it's "kind of a complicated issue."

If the prospective buyer is Thomas Tull, the land may remain undeveloped, like the 8,000 acres Tull already owns in the county.

"Maybe Tull is just looking for a big enclave," Merigliano said. "A lot of wealthy folks like that."

Merigliano compared Tull to John D. Rockefeller Jr., who bought up land around Jackson in the 1920s — infuriating residents in the process. Rockefeller eventually donated the 35,000 acres he purchased to the federal government, which became a part of Grand Teton National Park. The lack of development on the land Tull already owns may be indicative of "conservation sentiments," Merigliano said.

"I think it's more complicated than just don't sell it, but my feeling is not to sell it," he added.

Process issues

Commenters also raised the issue of the department of lands not telling the Beard family that they were considering selling the parcel until the land board approved the sale.

Joe Fort, who lives between Driggs and Teton, called the state's ex post facto notification of the Beards "poor form" and "bad behavior."

The department was “cautious about not wanting to put something on their radar that would get people needlessly spun up,” Woodland said. He agreed that the department should have told the Beards before.

The Beards have been great stewards of the land, Woodland said.

“I don’t want anyone to think we don’t appreciate the stewardship that has already taken place from our lessees,” he said.