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For a third time, Teton County, Idaho, commissioners punt decision on Tetonia land sale

Commissioners grasp for consensus yet again. They'll try once more.

By Christina MacIntosh / Environmental Reporter
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The Teton County, Idaho, commissioners on Monday failed to reach consensus in a third meeting about a proposed sale of state trust land in Tetonia.

Commissioner Dan Powers thinks that the commission should object to the sale. Commission Chair Brad Wolfe is torn between representing constituents' opposition to the sale and his own feeling that it's a smart business decision on the state's part. Commissioner Ron James believes it is the state's right to decide to choose what to do with the parcel.

"This could go on forever," Wolfe said, proposing a fourth discussion on the matter. "But if there's any way possible we could become united I want to."

Each county commissioner has already composed a letter on the sale and each will write another letter this week incorporating all three positions to be discussed, tweaked and agreed upon during a special session Friday. The commission is required to submit comment to the state by Sept. 19.

"I think we're all closer to the same page than we think we are," Wolfe said.

At issue is a 160-parcel of land, known as Driggs 160, which is currently leased by rancher Nick Beard. The land is used to generate revenue for the state's charitable institutions endowment, which benefits veterans, juvenile corrections and the state hospital.

Beard pays the state \$950 per year to run cattle on the parcel for 45 days during the summer, with a 20-year lease set to expire in 2032.

But in July, the State Board of Land Commissioners voted to sell the parcel at auction. The sale was prompted by interest in the parcel from a local landowner thought to be Thomas Tull, a billionaire who owns north of 8,000 acres of land in Teton County.

A spokesperson for Tull has not responded to several requests for comment on his interest in the parcel.

Beard has been frustrated by the county's delay in coming to a decision.

"I just don't understand why we can't get a decision made and get on with our lives," he said.

Discussion 3

The commission's second discussion of the topic was light on public comment, but members of the public returned for the third discussion.

For the first time, a handful of people supported the sale.

Anthony Wilcox, a Tetonia resident, suggested that the commission take a "neutral tone" on the sale.

"I think we can feel sorry for the Beards that they're going to lose this longtime lease they had, but I think we also have to look at the future of this endowment money," Wilcox said.

Both Wilcox and Ida Hansen, another Tetonia resident, told commissioners that a petition against the sale circulating online should not be taken as entirely representative of community sentiment, as it includes signatures from out of the county and state.

"I think it would have more weight if it came directly from Idaho constituents," Wilcox said.

Hansen agreed with Wolfe and James' position that the sale is ultimately up to the state.

"I think this is basically a state issue," Hansen said. "But if you want to oppose it, I don't have an issue with that. It doesn't matter to me."

Of the nine people who showed up and gave public comment Monday, the remaining seven spoke out against the sale. Former county commissioners Cindy Riegel and Michael Whitfield were among them.

Whitfield, who retired in May, said the sale “flies in the face” of the county’s comprehensive plan, which lists agriculture as one of the valley’s primary values.

“I think you best serve the people of this county by notifying the state of opposition, as the people have asked,” Whitfield said.

This sentiment was echoed by Tetonia resident Scott Jacobsen.

“We don’t need to be giving land away to any more billionaires and kicking off fifth generation ranchers who have no opportunity to pick up other land and continue the ranching tradition,” Jacobsen said. “Somebody’s got to stand up and say enough’s enough.”

Commissioner uncertainty

Wolfe reported having received around 100 emails in opposition to the sale and a single-digit number in favor, but he wondered if public opinion is more mixed than it appears.

“If so many others feel the opposite direction, I wish they would have been more vocal,” he said. “I know these people may be the only ones who oppose it, but they’re the ones who have spoken.”

Beard doesn’t think that community opinion is very mixed.

“If the people supported it you would probably be hearing from them,” he said. “If they don’t want to talk about it, then I don’t think they have a say.”

Contact Christina MacIntosh at 307-732-5911 or environmental@jhnewsandguide.com.

Christina MacIntosh

Christina covers the environment and public lands. She has previously lived and reported in Montana and California.