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## Council appears divided ahead of final vote on public lands initiative

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by Rudy Herndon

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After seven months of work on a Utah congressman's public lands bill, the Grand County Council is essentially back where it started last November.

Five of the council's seven members reached an informal consensus last week that the county should stick with its 1999-era wilderness plan, subject to a few minor changes. Grand County Council chairman Lynn Jackson and vice chairwoman Elizabeth Tubbs withheld their support for that idea during a discussion-only May 16 workshop on Rep. Rob Bishop's public lands initiative.

By the same 5-2 show of hands, most council members also signaled that they would oppose a three-person study committee's proposals to create a national recreation area near Moab.

Grand County Council member Jim Nyland said he would not support any final recommendations to Congress that go beyond the county's 1999 proposal, which would create an estimated 251,841 acres of wilderness.

"I hate to be pretty blunt, but I'm going to support [that plan]," Nyland said. "Really, I don't understand why things aren't going alright the way they are right now."

Grand County Councilwoman Patricia Holyoak agreed to support that plan, as well. But she suggested that she'd prefer to see the county take an entirely different approach by backing state lawmakers' efforts to gain control of Utah's public lands.

"I really want to see things go back to the state," Holyoak said.

Councilman and study committee member Rory Paxman worked with Nyland and Jackson to come up with a range of long-term federal land designations for the full council's consideration. But after all of that effort, Paxman said he sees no alternative to the county's 1999 plan.

"I think we're going to have to put it back to what the council has done in the past," he said.

That's probably not the kind of comment that Jackson hoped to hear last November, when he first asked the council to step up its involvement in Bishop's initiative.

At the time, Jackson said the county's existing plan was "kind of weak" compared to the detailed proposals that other stakeholders across eastern Utah had already submitted to Bishop's office.

In response, the council formed a study committee to develop three alternative federal land management recommendations – each of which included proposals to create a new national recreation area, among other key ideas.

The fact that five council members rejected the proposed national recreation area outright seemed to catch Jackson off guard.

"Wow. I am stunned, and I don't even know what to say," Jackson said, just before he paused for a moment to collect his thoughts. "If we are not going to consider any type of national recreation area in Grand County, we have just wasted a whole lot of time."

Bishop, a Utah Republican, previously commended the study committee for its willingness to consider the idea of a national recreation area, calling it one of several big concessions on the county's part.

Bishop Communications Director Melissa Subbotin told The Times-Independent last month that the committee further showed its flexibility by adding proposed wilderness to its 1999 plan.

Paxman suggested that the group was committed to finding a balance between conservation and natural resource development. But he ultimately voiced frustration with the process.

"We worked really hard on this, and we tried to [find] middle ground. The problem is, we didn't get anywhere," Paxman said. "It's been really aggravating."

Grand County Council member Ken Ballantyne said he delved into similar issues during a past stint on the council, and he did not sound optimistic about the latest attempts to settle public lands management once and for all.

"This is a never-ending process, and we're not going to have a solution in my opinion," Ballantyne said.

Jackson said he went into the process thinking that most of the county's voters stood somewhere in the middle of the political spectrum. However, by the time he finished reading through the latest public comments on the study committee's alternatives, Jackson came to the conclusion that only 20 percent of all respondents fall into that camp. The first round of comments included more than 180 letters, with a wide majority – about 90 percent – supporting more wilderness.

"I had my eyes opened," he said.

According to Jackson, 40 percent of the most recent letter writers want “all wilderness,” while 40 percent don’t want any wilderness at all.

“There is never going to be a consensus in this county on one side or the other,” Jackson said.

Although Tubbs said she doesn’t have any problems with more wilderness or a national recreation area, she noted that public comments on the study committee’s alternatives are “pretty evenly” divided on both sides.

In response, she suggested that the council should try to find middle ground.

“I would like to find some sort of balance in the center,” Tubbs said.

However, the council shouldn’t be in a hurry to act on any final recommendations to Bishop’s office, she said.

Instead, it should use the public comments it received to shape the study committee’s recommendations into a final proposal.

“There’s something wrong with the process when there’s three plans that don’t incorporate a lot of things – ideas – that a lot of people in this community want,” Tubbs said.

The council plans to continue its discussion of the study committee’s proposals during a May 30 workshop; a final vote on recommendations to Bishop’s office could follow some time in June, according to Jackson.

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