

County takes early step toward Book Cliffs road

Pippa Thomas Moab Sun News Reporter | Posted: Wednesday, March 26, 2014 9:02 am

The Grand County Council riled some citizens at its meeting on Tuesday, March 18, when it approved a motion to send Uintah County a letter proposing collaborating on two feasibility studies analyzing a potential road through Sego Canyon in the Book Cliffs.

Currently, an unsurfaced, 15-mile-long road extends north from I-70 at Thompson Springs through Sego Canyon to the southern end of the State and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) land block. The road ends where it reaches a one-mile section of Native American lands at the top of Sego Canyon.

“Grand County would like to investigate the feasibility of improving transportation in this area between the SITLA block and the I-70/railway corridor, and perhaps additional routes between our counties,” according to the letter, signed by council chair Lynn Jackson. “If this concept is of interest to (Uintah County) we would be glad to engage in additional discussions and develop more tangible plans.”

The idea of a paved highway connecting Uintah and Grand County through the Book Cliffs has been raised several times in Moab’s past, beginning the late 1980s and as recently as 2007, meeting strong opposition each time.

Many of the people who had gathered to hear the discussion expressed anger after the motion passed.

“It’s a sad day... here we go again,” resident Kiley Miller said. “The Book Cliffs highway is under consideration after so many times that it’s come up in front of the county and the people have overwhelmingly spoken in the past that we do not want this.”

“I think this issue is really representational of the fact that our community is not well-represented within our council and I think that’s very unfortunate,” resident Emily Stock said. “I’m looking forward to a new election year.”

Jackson told the crowd gathered in the Council Chambers that the council had discussed the concept of the road informally.

“As we started working on Congressman Bishop’s public lands bill process and we started looking at the potential of creating a large wilderness area in the Book Cliffs, we recognized that if we proceeded in creating a large block of wilderness, that an opportunity somewhere down the road for any kind of enhanced transportation would be gone,” Jackson said.

The public lands bill is Rep. Rob Bishop’s (R-Utah) attempt to resolve public lands conflicts—such as that between advocates for oil and gas development and advocates for wilderness designations—with

compromise within rural eastern Utah counties. A Council subcommittee has been preparing recommendations for land designation in Grand County.

To keep a development opportunity viable, the council would like to identify, in the public lands bill, a corridor along Segoe Canyon where an enhanced road or pipeline could potentially be built.

The impetus for enhancing transportation comes from the Eastern Utah Economic Coalition, an organization of the seven eastern Utah rural counties.

“A big part of their economy is the extraction industry, especially in Uintah and Duchesne,” said Ken Davey, the City of Moab economic-development specialist. “They were suggesting ways they could get more oil and gas via truck or pipeline down to the railroad.”

Upgrading the route through Segoe Canyon could cut mileage between Moab and Vernal from 230 to about 160 miles.

“There have been some of suggestions it could mean lots of money to Grand County,” Jackson told the crowd gathered in the Council Chambers. “If hydrocarbons were hauled down Segoe Canyon on a road the county owned, we could charge a fee. Basically it’s a toll road. It could be millions of dollars for this county.”

The issue of needed revenue makes the idea of the road all the more difficult for some.

“When you’ve sat through a County budgeting process—or eight of them like I have—you really do see there are many needs they’re trying to balance that require money,” said Audrey Graham, who sat on the County Council from 2004 through 2012.

“Many of the people in that County Council room (on March 18) would probably be happier with having their taxes raised than they would be with having the Book Cliffs road happen, and that’s kind of the place this puts us. When we don’t have more economic development, then we’re in the position of needing to raise taxes.”

Several citizens spoke publicly during the meeting, expressing their concerns about a road’s potential impact on cultural artifacts and the environment.

“My concern is basically about the disturbance on the archeological sites that are in Segoe Canyon,” Michael Peck said. “I think we need to make sure that we act appropriately toward another sovereign nation’s material property.”

“My understanding is there is more hydrocarbon in the Book Cliffs than has burned in the history of mankind,” Dave Erley said. “So if we really go full bore in developing those resources we’re basically condemning future generations to that decision of (putting) twice as much carbon out there.”

Jackson thanked Erley for his comment, but said he believes the hydrocarbons in Uintah Basin are going to be developed regardless of what Grand County does.

“Those resources are going to be developed by decisions and factors far beyond our control,” Jackson said.

Davey said Uintah and Duchesne counties are looking at ways to benefit their economies. One aspect of that is creating a more streamlined route for transporting hydrocarbons from the Uintah Basin to the rail line. There are two possible routes where the rail line can be accessed: one through Grand County to the Thompson or Crescent Junction area, and one through Price.

“They prefer the one that goes through Grand County because it’s shorter, it’s easier to design, it has less impact on the land than the route that would go to Price,” Davey said. “But the fact is that if Grand County doesn’t go along with looking at a study like this, they will choose the route to Price.”

Funding for the road would come from either the state or, “in some cases, from the companies that would be interested in it,” Davey said. It also might provide local employment opportunities with higher-paying jobs in the extraction industry.

“We really don’t know the economic potential, so that’s one of the studies we would do,” Davey said.

In its letter, the council proposed two studies: one to analyze the potential economic benefits of such a road for Grand County and the other to “provide a reconnaissance-level analysis of potential routes.”

Grand County attorney Andrew Fitzgerald recommend the council revise its letter with more specific wording regarding the studies.

“I assume, if Uintah County is interested, they’ll pick whoever does the study,” Fitzgerald said. “I think this county wants to be able to have some controls about how broad their study will be, what they’ll look at—is the group doing the study an energy type group? And I think the county will want to make sure a bias doesn’t find its way into these studies.”

The council agreed to Fitzgerald’s recommendations and, after changing some wording in the letter, approved the motion to send the revised letter to Uintah county with a 7-0 vote.

“Before people get their shorts too bunched up about this, we’re just talking about a study,” Jackson told the disgruntled citizens in attendance. “No decisions are being made here. No decision will be made in the land bill about whether a road will or will not be built.”