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County seeks Uintah's feedback on new Book Cliffs road study

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Is it feasible to build a paved road through the Sego Canyon section of Grand County's rugged Book Cliffs? County officials are hoping that their counterparts on the Uintah County Commission will help them answer that question.

The Grand County Council voted unanimously on March 18 to approve a letter asking Uintah County officials if they would be interested in jointly studying the feasibility of developing an "enhanced transportation corridor" through the canyon.

According to the letter, one proposed study would look at potential routes, as well as the costs needed to develop a possible transportation corridor. A second study would focus on the economic benefits such a road could bring to both counties, Grand County Council chairman Lynn Jackson said.

It's not the first time officials in either county have broached the idea of building a new route that could shorten driving times between Moab and the booming Uintah Basin around Vernal.

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, officials in both counties pushed for a 70-mile highway through the Book Cliffs, and in 2007, the Uintah County Commission sought Grand County's support for a new highway through Hay Canyon.

But both plans, along with similar proposals over the years, became mired in controversy and ultimately faded away.

More than two decades ago, the former Grand County Commission's support for a planned road created such an uproar among conservationists and local residents that citizens successfully pushed through a ballot initiative that eliminated the three-member commission. That process created the current seven-member council form of county government.

More recently, members of the 2007 Grand County Council voiced skepticism about Uintah County's revived proposal, noting that officials and citizens alike were concerned about the idea of committing future county revenues to the idea.

"All three of us were very clear that Grand County is neither interested nor able to invest public funds in this project," former Grand County Council member Bob Greenberg said in March 2007, according to an article in The Times-Independent.

Perhaps with that history in mind, Jackson emphasized that the current council simply aims to find out if Uintah County officials are interested in teaming up on a new study, or studies.

No decisions have been made, Jackson said, and no decisions are imminent.

“Before people get their shorts too bunched up ... We’re just talking about a study,” he told those in attendance at the council’s March 18 meeting.

Grand County Council vice chairwoman Elizabeth Tubbs reiterated that the council’s action is extremely limited in scope.

“We’re not approving anything besides this letter,” she said.

According to Jackson, county officials who are involved with the recently formed Eastern Utah Economic Development Coalition have already held informal discussions about the concept.

As Jackson and others began to work on a Utah congressman’s ongoing public lands initiative, they felt it would be a good idea to analyze the feasibility of a transportation corridor through the Book Cliffs, he said.

As outlined in the letter to Uintah County, the studies would build on earlier surveys that looked at economic- and transportation-related issues in the Uintah Basin.

Among other things, the studies could examine the potential for hydrocarbon development on state School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) property in northern Grand County. They could also analyze the possible economic benefits of transporting energy resources from the southeastern Uintah Basin through the Book Cliffs to Interstate 70, the letter says.

In the past, project proponents were never able to overcome concerns about construction-related costs, or the potential impacts that a new Book Cliffs road could have on the surrounding environment.

Today, however, there are indications that funding to build and maintain a road could come from developers, as opposed to Grand County’s residents, the letter says.

There’s also a possibility that Grand County could add language to Rep. Rob Bishop’s public lands initiative that – if approved – would give Grand County ownership of the road and right-of-way, according to the letter.

Ownership would allow the county to charge fees for every barrel of hydrocarbon fuels that energy companies transported down the road, or via a pipeline, the letter says.

While financial considerations about a Book Cliffs road may have changed, conservationists' concerns about the idea have not.

Castle Valley resident Michael Peck told the council that he is concerned about potential disturbances to archeological sites in the Sego Canyon area.

Dave Erley, Castle Valley's mayor, said he hopes a feasibility study would look at the impacts that energy development in the area could have on global climate change.

Environmentalists say that tar sands and oil shale mining in the Book Cliffs would produce three to five times more greenhouse gases than conventional petroleum development, and Erley suggested the county should consider those repercussions.

Grand County Attorney Andrew Fitzgerald called the idea of a Book Cliffs highway an "extremely divisive" issue in the community.

In light of past controversies, Fitzgerald suggested that Grand County should ensure that bias doesn't find its way into any feasibility studies.

If an analysis is done, the county needs to have a strong voice during that process, he said.

Jackson, in turn, said there was never any intent to cede control of the studies to Uintah County.

"We're not just going to turn something over to Uintah County," Jackson said, noting that he envisions the process as a collaboration between the two entities.

Additional information about the issue is available in the Grand County Council's March 18 packet, which is online at:
www.grandcountyutah.net/pdf/council/2014_03_18_packet.pdf.

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