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Sego Canyon road: Path to prosperity or harm?

Grand County • Sharp debate erupts as economy is shifting from mining to tourism.

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Moab • A narrow chasm that exits Utah's Book Cliffs just outside Thompson Springs, Sego Canyon harbors one of the finest locations to view Colorado Plateau cultural treasures that date across millennia. Examples of rock art representing various ancient cultures are carved and painted into the stone right next to one another.

And someday a paved highway will run through it, a future shortcut to move oil and equipment between the Uinta Basin and Interstate 70.

That's the vision of all three alternatives the Grand County Council is considering as it decides on recommendations to submit for Rep. Rob Bishop's public lands initiative — a legislative process geared toward resolving eastern Utah's land-use battles in one "grand bargain."

Out of this deal, the county hopes to gain title to a 15-mile corridor, currently designated a class B county road, down the canyon. Officials would levy a "friction fee" on every barrel moving through, generating millions in revenue for the county, according to Council Chairman Lynn Jackson.

But at a public meeting Wednesday, the proposed road became yet another bone of contention between those who want to protect Grand County's scenic lands and those looking to see more drilling, mining and roads.

Speakers either praised the Sego road as a path to prosperity or derided it as a "hydrocarbon highway" to hell that would promote a tar sands boom on the taxpayers' dime.

While some fear tar sands and oil shale mining could devastate the Book Cliffs and unleash a tsunami of greenhouse gas emissions, longtime resident and anti-wilderness firebrand Ray Tibbetts welcomes such development.

"That's a treasure chest for Grand County. Let's use it. It's time we enjoy our resources," he told those filling all 300 seats and lining the walls of Moab's Grand Center meeting hall.

At least 50 people queued up to share their hopes — in under three minutes each — for the future of the county's public lands, which are blessed with beautiful landscapes and promising mineral potential.

The three alternatives, the product of months of committee deliberations, outline a range of conservation proposals that would set protective measures for 336,000 acres to 900,000 acres, and would welcome extractive industries elsewhere on Bureau of Land Management holdings in Grand County.

The alternatives don't address any national forest lands, to the dismay of those who want greater protection of water sources in the La Sal Mountains.

Pro-wilderness advocates were disappointed with the most protective alternative because it excludes cherished areas, such as Fisher Towers and Hell Roaring and Labyrinth canyons. It would accord wilderness status on less than half the 835,000 acres proposed for such protection in America's Red Rock Wilderness Act.

"None of the alternatives represent a majority of your constituents' views as documented in citizens' letters," Mary Beth Fitzburgh told the council. "You are not elected to represent the interests of private fossil fuel companies, or foot the bill to develop their infrastructure."



Leah Hogsten | The Salt Lake Tribune The crowd of differing opinions showed concern on their faces. The Grand County Council Public Lands Working Committee got an earful from Grand County residents who voiced their concerns for long term designations of public lands within the county, Wednesday, April 23, 2014. Three alternative plans were created for consideration as part of U. S. Congressman Rob Bishop's public lands bill initiative.

In the past three decades, Moab's economy has switched from reliance on mining and drilling to tourism and recreation, which now account for 70 percent of the county's employment. Many speakers contended the council's alternatives look to Grand County's boom-and-bust past rather than its current direction as an international destination.

But a common refrain focused on the oftentimes meager pay and benefits associated with tourism jobs and their seasonal nature.

"We don't have an economy to sustain families to feed their kids at night," said educator Kathryn Jackson.

All three alternatives call for a prohibition on any future monument designations under the Antiquities Act, the 1906 law that enabled the preservation of what became Arches National Park. Such designations have become controversial in recent years because they can be made without local input, although that has not always the case.

"We shouldn't have to concern ourselves that a president would come in and put additional acreage off limits to certain uses," Jackson said.

But county Planning Commission Chairman Mike Duncan opposes such a ban.

"If we didn't have the Antiquities Act, we wouldn't have our national parks," he warned, "and this town would be deader than a doornail."

The forum grew increasingly testy as the night wore on, putting Utah's cultural divide on full display. Some dismissed concerns that mining and drilling damage the land and demanded an end to federal oversight of public land.

"You people think we're out here ruining the environment," said Dusty Wilson. "I'm tired of this BS. We're still here. We're sustainable and we don't need a baby sitter."

Ashley Korenblat, who owns a cycling guiding business, called for an end to divisive rhetoric.

"Every day I use gas and you breathe air," she said. "We won't make progress until we stop with the us-versus-them and work together on creating a vibrant economy for Grand County."

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