

Commissioners delay Spanish Valley plan

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by Bill Boyle, San Juan Record Editor

Concern about development in Spanish Valley dominated the June 16 meeting of the San Juan County Commission.

Commissioners tabled a recommendation by the county planning commission to approve a "preliminary community structure plan" for more than 5,000 acres of ground held by the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration

(SITLA).

SITLA plans to develop their significant holdings in the area, which sits adjacent to the fast-growing community of Moab.

The plan suggests that thousands of “units” could eventually be developed in the new project, including residential, commercial, and industrial components.

SITLA officials stress that the plan includes the maximum development potential of each area of the project and is not likely to reach the maximum levels.

Regardless, the project could have a significant impact on the entire Moab area, in addition to San Juan County.

At the maximum, the potential growth in Spanish Valley alone could nearly double the current population of San Juan County.

Elise Erler, with SITLA, explained that they followed the Spanish Valley Zoning Ordinances which were approved in November 2019.

“It is a very thorough and lengthy process,” said Erler. “We are willing to undertake that. This is step one of a full process.”

County Administrator Mack McDonald said SITLA “has complied exactly with the ordinance” and received the recommendation of the county planning commission.

Commissioners asked County Attorney Kendall Laws to write a legal opinion on the matter.

McDonald said that after hearing the public comment portion of the meeting, he realized there is a lot of confusion and recommended the commission table the proposal for further study.

“We want to make sure everyone is on the same page,” said McDonald.

For the first time in more than three months, traditional public comment was taken at the meeting.

Ten residents of Grand and northern San Juan County expressed concern about the development of the SITLA land in Spanish Valley.

They include Sheila Canavan, Marlene Huckabee, Dave Early, Carolyn Dailey, Monette Clark, Larry Witt, John Weisheit, Liz Thomas, Kevin Walker, and Jennifer Weisheit.

The concern expressed included questions about water rights, the implications of development agreements, and the eventual incorporation of Spanish Valley.

Carolyn Daily suggested that the proposal on the agenda would give SITLA free reign to develop the entire 5,000 acre area at once.

She said, "It is naïve to give SITLA cart blanche to begin developing all of their land anytime and anywhere."

Grand County resident Kevin Walker asked for cooperation with Grand County, adding that 90 percent of the Grand County population lives within five minutes of Spanish Valley, and the vast majority of San Juan County residents live 45 minutes or more from Spanish Valley.

Administrator McDonald stated that the proposal is just the first step on the project.

The proposal would add all 5,000 acres of SITLA holdings in Spanish Valley into the Planned Community Development (PCD).

Approximately 75 percent of the SITLA holdings are in the current PCD.

He said the SITLA request will help facilitate careful planning. "This application will take the project through the steps to create a master planned community," said McDonald.

The preliminary plan creates zones for a neighborhood

center, central development area, perimeter development area, flex development area, highway commercial, and open space.

The project would leave 40 percent of the land in open space.

"The next portion of the process would be the development of a community structure plan," said McDonald. "And that would come back to the Commissioners."

In other matters at the June 16 meeting, Commissioners approved a contract between the San Juan County Sheriff and the City of Monticello to provide law enforcement services. The contract had been approved earlier by the Monticello City Council.

The contract is for two officers and will generate \$230,000 a year for five years. Monticello City vehicles and equipment will be transferred to the Sheriff as part of the agreement.

Commissioner Bruce Adams said that San Juan County would be responsible if the city could not afford its own police department.

Adams said, "We could approve this and receive reimbursement for the level of service, or not be reimbursed at all." The contract stipulates the level of service for Monticello.

Commissioners approved an application to receive Coronavirus Relief Funds from the federal government. Administrator McDonald explained that these are heavily restricted funds.

The first wave of funding is \$729,365, with the remainder expected in the future. The total funds are \$2,188,094. McDonald said \$107,729 of the total will go to Blanding and \$58,192 will go to Monticello.

He added that there will be proposals to use the funds in the future, including a portion for Bluff.

The funding could provide opportunities for grants and loans and to purchase supplies and personal protective equipment to combat COVID-19. McDonald added that the funds could be used to purchase updated technology for electronic meetings and work-at-home scenarios for county employees.

Commissioners approved the extension of a water pipeline and troughs to a grazing allotment on SITLA property on the Bluff Bench.

Aging and Adult Services will contract with the State of Utah to extend services to high-risk individuals during the coronavirus pandemic. The program will include delivery, meals, outreach, transportation, telehealth, and more.

In addition, Public Health Director Kirk Bengé discussed a \$132,000 grant from the federal government for COVID-19 response. The grant covers two years.

Commissioners rescinded a previous letter of support to extend an easement through land owned by SITLA near Mule Canyon.

The request had been approved at the June 2 meeting, but Commission Chairman Kenneth Maryboy asked to reconsider.

The easement would keep All Terrain Vehicles (ATVs) off a portion of Highway 95 near the Texas Flat road by crossing the SITLA section on an established two-track trail.

The easement had been requested by a local tour guide as a safety measure

Commissioner Maryboy said the area, in Bears Ears National Monument, is in a sensitive location "where people feel it shouldn't be bothered with."

Commissioner Adams said the road already exists and no work is needed.

Commissioner Maryboy countered that he is "more concerned about the traditionalists and those that do their prayers in that area."

The approved letter says, "This easement is not necessary for the general public access."

Andria Wilson, the owner of an appraisal company in Spanish Valley, was appointed to the San Juan County Economic Development Board. Commissioner Willie Grayeyes was also appointed to serve on the Economic Development board.

In addition, Melvin Nelson is appointed to another term on the planning commission.

Administrator McDonald said the planning commission is looking for members from the Blanding and La Sal areas. "Nobody has applied," said McDonald. "If you are interested, please submit a resumé."

Commissioners approved a marketing grant application for the Visitor Services Department with the Utah Office of Tourism.

Visitor Services Director Natalie Randall said that in 2020, the county expects to collect just less than half of the Transient Room Taxes (TRT) that were collected in 2019.

TRT collections from January to May were around \$162,815 with estimated collections through the remainder of the year to total \$617,103.

If approved, the Utah Office of Tourism will match the \$275,000 of TRT funds contributed by the county.