

Development planned south of Moab could mean thousands more residents, double the population of San Juan County

Spanish Valley • Moab has been growing as an adventure destination for decades and draws more than [3 million visitors annually](#). But just 5 miles to the south, the unincorporated community of Spanish Valley has remained a relatively quiet mix of residential homes and agricultural lands.

"I don't feel the explosion like in downtown [Moab in terms of] numbers of people," said Marlene Huckabay, who has lived near Highway 191 in Spanish Valley for 25 years. The area is still defined by its rural character, she said. "I'm in my own little bubble, isolated."

Spanish Valley straddles the northern boundary of San Juan County and the southern end of Grand County, where Moab is located.

One of the restrictions on growth in Spanish Valley so far has been the area's reliance on septic systems, which limits

building density under health codes to one home per acre for lots that also have a culinary well. That barrier is set to be obliterated as a \$13 million [water and sewer project](#) nears completion this fall, potentially paving the way for a dramatic increase in the area's population.

The water and sewer projects were paid for through grants from state water agencies and the Community Impact Board. The School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) also chipped in \$2 million, which included connection fees to facilitate development on school trust land in Spanish Valley.

In 2017, San Juan County and SITLA hired the Salt Lake City-based firm Landmark Design to prepare an area plan, create a zoning map, and write draft ordinances for the 1,100 acres of private land and the 5,300 acres of SITLA land in Spanish Valley to prepare for growth.



(Zak Podmore | The Salt Lake Tribune) Five miles south of Moab, the unincorporated community of Spanish Valley is located at the far northern end of San Juan County. Around 80% of the non-federal land in the area consists of school trust lands.

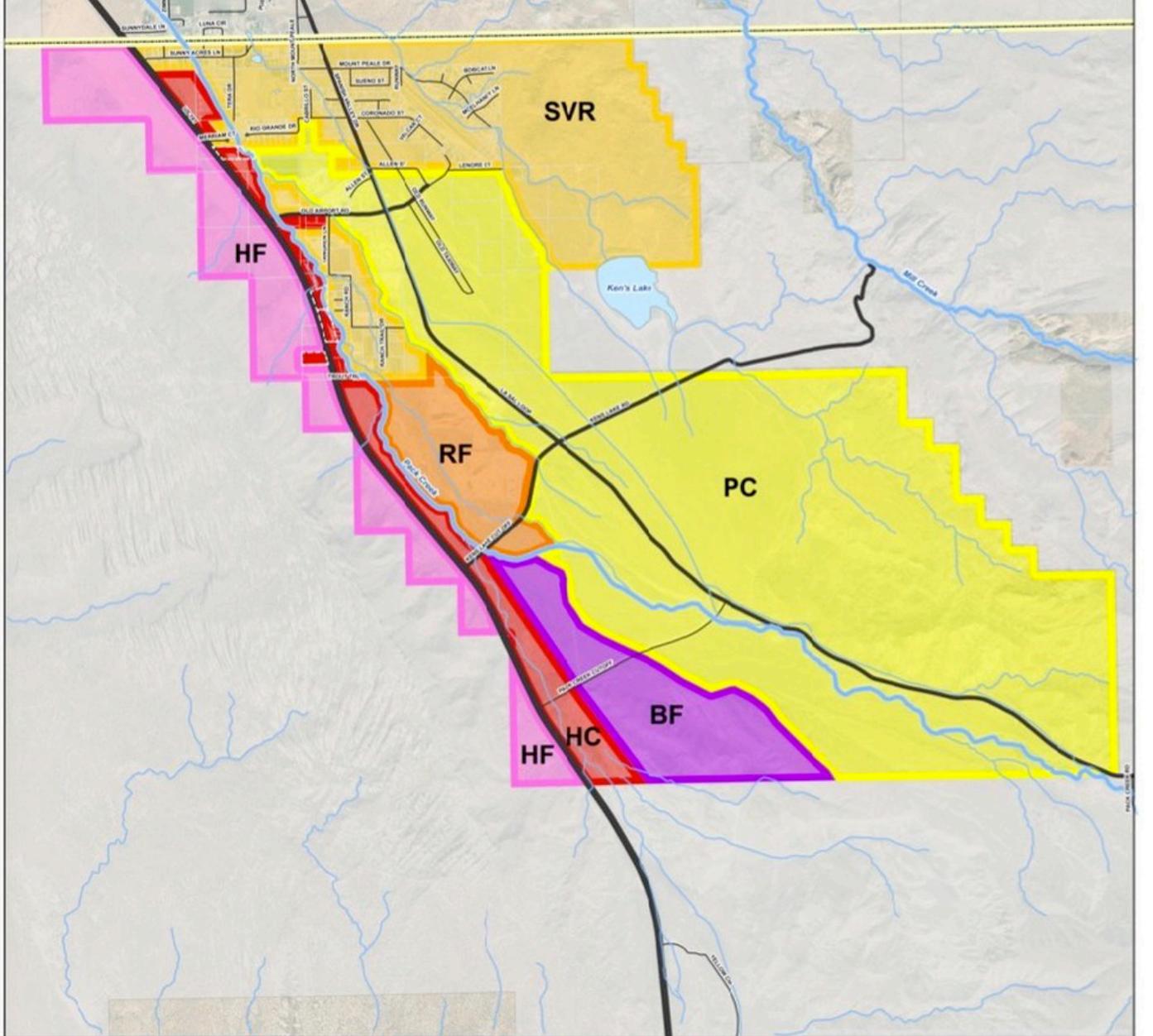
“The vision of this plan was looking at least 50 years down the road,” said Mark Vlastic, the president and owner of Landmark Design.

“It was a great project,” he added. “We’ve basically created [a proposal for] a new town south of Moab,” including guidelines for affordable housing, a trail system and off-highway commercial districts.

[Landmark Design’s area plan](#), which was adopted by the county in April 2018, outlines the potential construction of 5,500 new residences, or housing for nearly 14,000 people, which would nearly double the population of San Juan

County. Nearby Grand County has under 10,000 residents, half of them in Moab.

San Juan County Commissioner Bruce Adams, a Republican whose district includes Spanish Valley, boiled down his support for the potential development to two words: property taxes. San Juan County is the poorest in the state and Adams said developing the county's northern end would mean more money for schools, county funds and other services.



Planned Community (PC)
 Business Flex (BF)
 Existing Overnight Accomodation
 Lakes / Reservoirs
 County Boundary
 Rivers/Streams
 BLM Land

(Photo courtesy of Landmark Designs / San Juan County) Proposed zoning map for Spanish Valley in northern San Juan County, which includes 5,300 acres of mostly undeveloped SITLA land.

A set of draft ordinances prepared by Landmark Design and modified by the San Juan Planning Commission was presented to the County Commission in March after the [election of Willie Grayeyes and Kenneth Maryboy](#), two

Democrats who were not involved in the previous planning process. A dark sky ordinance that was included in Landmark's proposal was not recommended by the Planning Commission, and that got the attention of some Spanish Valley residents.

"When I saw these ordinances were to be passed in March, I got five of my neighbors in my car and we drove" the 50 miles to Monticello for the San Juan County Commission meeting, said Carolyn Dailey, a homeowner in the valley. "Our protest was originally against not having the dark sky ordinance."

Grand County has recently passed dark sky restrictions, but San Juan County does not have them. Concerned residents noted in public comments that light pollution would not respect the county boundary. They also expressed fears that a temporary [prohibition on new construction of overnight rentals](#) in Moab could spur runaway tourist lodging development in Spanish Valley if a similar moratorium wasn't put into place.

Adams moved to approve the ordinances, citing the numerous public hearings that had already been held, but the outcry from Spanish Valley residents, including Dailey, appeared to sway Maryboy and Grayeyes. Adams' motion died without a second. In May, the commission passed a six-month moratorium on commercial development along

the highway corridor and directed Landmark to revise the ordinances with more local input.

In the meantime, Dailey founded a grassroots group called the Northern San Juan County Coalition, which she said regularly communicates with more than 90 Spanish Valley residents and was heavily involved with submitting input to Landmark during the revision process.

The [new draft ordinances](#) were released Sept. 13. They include a more robust dark sky ordinance adopted from Moab and Grand County.

Vlasic said at first he thought the moratorium was just another obstacle, but he is now pleased with the revisions, which also include a sign ordinance and many other tweaks.

"It's actually a good thing," he said, "and we're going to end up with a better set of ordinances."

Said SITLA in a statement earlier this year: "It is SITLA's understanding the proposed ordinances will serve as the development code to guide growth and development in the San Juan-Spanish Valley, which is envisioned primarily as a residential community with some areas of commercial services."

Other obstacles, however, may confront developers as they begin to look at buying land from SITLA and filling out the

50-year plan. The San Juan Spanish Valley Special Service District has a water right to pump 5,000 acre-feet of groundwater per year, or an average daily use of 4.5 million gallons.

But after the area plan was adopted, the U.S. Geological Survey released a report that concluded there is [30% to 40% less groundwater](#) in the watershed than was previously estimated. According to Landmark's plan, the existing water right alone would not be enough to supply 6,000 residents, let alone 14,000. Vlasic said it may be possible to pump water from the Colorado River, and the plan was developed with the assumption that water rights could be found as growth occurs.

One of the first sales of SITLA land in the valley has already generated a firestorm of controversy. In December, Love's Travel Stops & Country Stores bid \$1.2 million on a 13-acre parcel that abuts Huckabay's property just south of the Grand County line.

Huckabay said the potential for a major truck stop being built right next to her residential neighborhood has her and many of her neighbors concerned about water, air, light and noise pollution. Members of the grassroots coalition have spoken out repeatedly against the project at SITLA and San Juan County Commission meetings. Of more than 170 letters submitted to Landmark on the matter, Dailey said,

92% opposed the truck stop.

Those concerns were directly addressed in the new draft ordinances, Vlastic said, which would allow for a truck stop farther south but not in the proposed parcel. "It's an imperfect situation if a truck stop locates next to a residential neighborhood like that," he said, though he noted that poor planning and zoning in the past may have contributed to the current situation.



(Zak Podmore | The Salt Lake Tribune) Spanish Valley resident Marlene Huckabay stands outside her home in Spanish Valley, San Juan County, Utah, which abuts the site of a proposed Love's truck stop on school trust lands.

Love's may be grandfathered in under the old ordinances that allow truck stops within a 1,000-foot highway commercial zone, but Huckabay and members of the

Northern San Juan County Coalition are asking Love's and SITLA to rethink the location of the truck stop regardless.

Huckabay said it would hurt SITLA's public image if the truck stop is built. "At this point, everyone that I ever speak to who has done any dealings with SITLA hate them, absolutely hate them, because they're mongrels. They don't care about the public."

But Huckabay added if SITLA were to sell to a different developer such as a medical facility or a solar company, she could live with it. "That would be one of the ways SITLA could get some points [with residents]."

School trust lands account for 6% of the land in Utah and were designated at statehood for the benefit of schools and other public institutions. It's common practice for SITLA to lease or sell trust land to private entities to raise funds for its beneficiaries — and maximizing profits is its No. 1 mandate under legislation passed in the 1990s.

"Revenue generated from development of school trust lands is deposited into the \$2.5 billion Permanent School Fund, which provides annual interest income to Utah schools at no cost to taxpayers," SITLA Director David Ure said in a statement.

In 2018, SITLA distributed a record \$74 million to the public

school system, or an average of \$113 per pupil, which accounts for less than 1.6% of per-pupil spending in a state that has [ranked last in the nation](#) for school spending for decades.

This year, SITLA is expected to distribute \$250,000 to the San Juan School District, about \$78 per pupil.

Landmark's draft ordinances will be reviewed by the San Juan Planning Commission in October and could see a vote by the County Commission in November, when the building moratorium is set to expire.

*Zak Podmore is a [Report for America](#) corps member and writes about conflict and change in San Juan County for *The Salt Lake Tribune*. Your donation to match our RFA grant helps keep him writing stories like this one; please consider [making a tax-deductible gift](#) of any amount today.*