

San Juan County delays action on SITLA's Spanish Valley plans

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The view of the southern part of Spanish Valley, at the county line of Grand and San Juan.

File photo by Carter Pape

By Bill Boyle

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San Juan County Commissioners on Tuesday tabled a recommendation by the county planning commission to

approve a "preliminary community structure plan" for more than 5,000 acres in Spanish Valley that is held by the School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration.

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 June 23 that they followed the Spanish Valley zoning ordinances that 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."

San Juan County Administrator Mack McDonald said SITLA

“has complied exactly with the ordinance” and received the recommendation of the county planning commission. Commissioners asked San Juan 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 he 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 County and northern San Juan County expressed concerns about the development of the SITLA land in Spanish Valley.

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

The concerns 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 carte

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% 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 said that the proposal is just the first step on the project.

The plan would add all 5,000 acres of SITLA holdings in Spanish Valley into the Planned Community Development (PCD). Approximately 87.5% of the SITLA holdings are in the current PCD. He said the SITLA request would help to 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."

Boyle is the editor of the San Juan Record.