

# San Juan County OKs guidelines for Spanish Valley development that could double county population

Debate over the future of fast-growing Spanish Valley dominated meetings over the past few weeks in San Juan County as a multiyear planning process advances for thousands of acres of private and state trust land south of Moab.

Ordinances and zoning maps for the area were passed by the San Juan County Commission on Nov. 19, just days before the expiration of a six-month commercial building moratorium. The actions impose initial [guidelines for a development that could eventually double the county's current population of 15,000.](#)

A public hearing on the ordinances grew heated as residents debated the merits of a zoning map and ordinances presented in September by Landmark Design — a county consultant — and an alternative proposed by the county's planning commission earlier this month.

Mark Vlasic, the president and owner of Landmark Design,

explained a [moratorium on construction for short-term rentals](#) implemented by the Moab City and Grand County councils could increase development pressure in northern San Juan County, which reaches to within a few miles of Moab.

The Landmark plan included restrictions on lodging, which Vlastic said were formulated in light of problems Moab has faced in recent years. The ordinances require developers to provide a "significant mix of employee housing, affordable housing, commercial, retail, office, civic and similar uses to offset the impacts of hotel/motel projects." The planning commission, however, recommended the county scrap those requirements and make other changes.

Commissioner Bruce Adams, a Republican whose district includes Spanish Valley, argued that Landmark, which he helped hire for the county in 2017, had created a plan that in some cases imposed too much restriction on development.

"I'm a rancher, and in my life ... every layer [of regulation] you put on me that makes me mother-may-I the government, I don't like it," he said.

The notion was seconded by the chairman of the planning commission, Trent Schafer, who said the Landmark plan included "a lot of government overreach," such as reductions to commercial zoning and codes that required

certain building materials and colors.

“What was presented to us, we truly believed private property rights were going right out the door,” he said, explaining why his commission had recommended loosening many restrictions.

But Jeff Mattson, one of many Spanish Valley residents who spoke out at the meeting, urged the commissioners to adopt Landmark’s original plan. The planning commission’s decision to remove the restrictions on hotels, he said, violated [a guiding area plan](#), passed by the former, Republican-controlled San Juan County Commission in April 2018, that expressed the goal of creating “a nontourism centered community that is distinctly different than Moab, yet still maintains its current close ties.”

Elise Erler, a School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) representative, also said her agency endorsed the original Landmark plan as “a good starting point.” SITLA, which is mandated to maximize revenues going into a trust fund for schools, manages 5,300 acres in Spanish Valley, or roughly 80% of the land covered by the plan. Erler said the agency would impose certain restrictions on its properties even if they were not required by the county ordinances.

SITLA helped fund a \$13 million [water and sewer project](#) in

Spanish Valley to facilitate future residential and commercial development on trust lands. It also helped fund the 2018 area plan while the county paid for Landmark's work on the zoning and ordinances.

Several Spanish Valley residents who also opposed the planning commission's changes noted that they did not expect to share a position with SITLA on the matter. In an August email exchange, which was obtained by a resident through a public records request, SITLA resource specialist Bryan Torgerson told a Love's Travel Stop representative that "the environmental progressives don't want any commercial [development] in Spanish Valley."

He added that SITLA was working to balance comments at a public meeting that was hosted by Landmark on Aug. 5 to discuss changes to the ordinances. "We have been working to get people at the meeting [who] are receptive to commercial development to speak on the record about the needs for commercial uses in Spanish Valley," he wrote.

Asked about the comments, Torgerson wrote in an email to The Salt Lake Tribune that he was not favoring a certain group but reminding "all parties that called in about the importance of attending and sharing their opinion at some of the upcoming meetings."

"Often," he wrote, "I hear from the same outspoken

individuals that are against all development and I often see them representing that side of things at the meetings."

While several residents of Spanish Valley, Monticello and Blanding expressed concerns at the Nov. 19 meeting that Landmark's plan would limit growth, those fears were apparently no longer shared by SITLA itself.

San Juan County Commissioners Willie Grayeyes and Kenneth Maryboy, both Democrats, eventually voted to reject the planning commission's recommended changes and pass the original Landmark ordinances.

"We're being twisted by the arm," Grayeyes said, referring to the tight timeline imposed by the planning commission's last-minute recommendations before the moratorium expires. "There is flexibility to adjust...it's not going to be all written in stone like [the] Ten Commandments."

Grayeyes went on to state that in the long run it would make sense for Spanish Valley to incorporate as a town so a local town council and planning commission could address these issues instead of the county, a move undertaken by Bluff last year.

"Landmark engaged with residents and property owners and collected input for many months, and submitted solid, comprehensive development ordinances that will preserve

the rural character of Spanish Valley, which was residents' primary concern, and also allow commercial development that will benefit residents and visitors alike," Maryboy said in a statement.

The approved plan is "a good compromise among all interests," he added.

To some, the conflicts over the ordinances illustrate why there was a need for planning in the first place. Already residents have filled commission meetings to express their opinions over a planned Love's truck stop, which abuts a residential neighborhood, and a gravel pit operator's request to license an [aggregate and hot mix asphalt plant's operations in the valley](#). Residents expressed fears that emissions from the asphalt plant and idling trucks at Love's could pose health risks to nearby residents.

Landmark's plan, which the commission adopted, buffers business zones between residential neighborhoods and more impactful commercial uses.

But large portions of the SITLA property throughout the valley that are leased by gravel companies were exempt from the new ordinances and zoning.

Ryan Holyoak, area manager for LeGrand Johnson Construction, implied that any attempts to change zoning

for the gravel mine properties would lead to litigation under a [law passed by the Utah Legislature](#) earlier this year that [limits the ability of cities and counties to regulate gravel pits](#).

“There isn’t one person in this room ... who didn’t benefit from the material we supplied, even to walk in this building,” Holyoak said, adding that any growth in Spanish Valley would also require materials supplied by gravel mines.

Similar conflicts have already played out on the Wasatch Front such as [Geneva Rock’s Point of the Mountain operations](#) in Draper and Lehi, where communities have pushed back on gravel operations near residential areas.

The commissioners agreed that they did not have the authority to rezone those areas under the new state law.

*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.*