

The Salt Lake Tribune

'Glamping' development proposal near Moab is generating an uproar

Resorts that cater to luxury camping are leasing school trust land near national parks. Critics say they are held to lower safety standards than hotels.

By Zak Podmore

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Looking Glass Rock • Paying up to \$600 per night to stay in a tent might not sound like a typical camping experience. But there is little that's typical with Under Canvas, a Montana-based resort company that offers "luxury camping" experiences near the entrances to popular national parks in Utah and elsewhere across the United States.



Photo caption: Under Canvas at Lake Powell-Grand Staircase, a luxury camping company, currently operates three resorts throughout Utah. Two more have been proposed.

Guests who visit the resorts can reserve king-size beds in canvas tents perched atop wooden decks with private bathrooms. They might unwind on the “yoga platform” or wander down trails that snake through the peaceful natural landscape. The resorts offer s’mores to guests, organize group activities and promote the option to rent out the entire facility for private events.

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According to critics, “glamping” enterprises like Under Canvas, which is backed by a multi-billion-dollar private equity firm, have found a way to sell accommodations at luxury hotel prices while bypassing zoning, safety and fire mitigation standards that may apply to similarly sized and priced hotels, all while putting pressure on remote areas outside of developed towns and cities.

Under Canvas development proposed near Canyonlands

The most recent development to be announced by the company, which will be the fifth Under Canvas resort in the state if it opens after the Bryce Canyon location, is in a remote part of San Juan County 25 miles south of Moab near Canyonlands National Park. The proposed 220-acre, 75-tent resort abuts a popular rock climbing and recreation area known as Looking Glass Rock. The plan to develop the area has generated strong opposition in the weeks since it was made public last month, sparking [a petition drive](#) signed by over 2,350 people, along with 650 comments.

“The opposition comes from being exasperated at what is happening to our community and our lands near our home,” said Dailey Haren, a lifelong Moab resident who started the petition. “We’ve watched one special place after another being lost to commercial interests.”

Looking Glass Rock features a deep arch that has long attracted hikers, picnickers and climbers. Dan McBrearty, chief development officer of Under Canvas, said that there has been “significant misinformation” shared on social media since the development proposal was announced, and some commenters incorrectly assumed the entire site would be closed to public access.

“The edge of our planned site is a quarter mile from the rock,” he said, “leaving plenty of public space to access and continue to enjoy both the rock and perimeter.”

But Haren worries that experience of visiting the impressive arch will be fundamentally changed if a glamping resort is built on adjacent school trust lands, even if the rock itself, most of which is on Bureau of Land Management land, will remain open to the public.



Photo caption: Looking Glass Rock, a remote arch long popular with hikers and rock climbers, is a quarter mile from the proposed site of a 75-unit luxury camping development in northern San Juan County. June 14, 2021. (Zak Podmore | The Salt Lake Tribune)

“Looking Glass for a lot of locals represents a part of the community that we still have access to for quiet, for solace, for peace,” she said, noting the Moab area has seen an explosion in tourist traffic over recent decades that has brought in sprawling development. “Our landscape is very precious and has inherent value that is much greater than economic value.”

Leasing school trust lands

As is also the case with the Under Canvas resorts near Lake Powell and Bryce Canyon, the Looking Glass development will be built on land managed by the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA), which is mandated by the state to make as much revenue as possible from its 3.4 million acres of holdings in order to help fund Utah’s public schools.

The terms of the glamping leases vary by location, but existing Under Canvas contracts pay over \$100,000 per year to SITLA plus 5% of gross revenues. The land near Looking Glass Rock had previously been leased to ranchers for grazing at a far lower rate and had been open to the public.



Photo caption: Over 70 acres of Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration (SITLA) land is slated for development by the "glamping" company Under Canvas in northern San Juan County. June 14, 2021. (Zak Podmore | The Salt Lake Tribune)

Leasing land from SITLA as opposed to purchasing it, McBrearty said, is “a mutual opportunity” for the company and the state agency, noting, “school trust lands designated for development are scattered throughout the state and in some cases are located near the national parks and monuments where our guests are interested in visiting.”

“Luxury camping or glamping continues in popularity but for how long, we just don’t know,” said Deena Loyola-Merrill, a spokesperson for SITLA. “Leases allow the Trust to make a good return while luxury camping is still popular and lucrative. After the lease expires, the property will be reclaimed. SITLA will still manage the trust land property and can market the same property for a new economic purpose.”

A ‘very low impact’ resort?

In February, SITLA announced through the state’s Resource Development Coordinating Committee that a company had proposed a “a very low impact commercial venture” near Looking Glass Rock “for tourism related purposes.” No further information was made public until the lease was already close to being finalized late last month. SITLA typically withholds the specific details of lease proposals until late in the process so competing companies don’t copy the development plan proposed for a given parcel during the bidding process.

“Under Canvas was deemed the best partner for use of those parcels,” Loyola-Merrill said, “largely driven by the company’s emphasis on land preservation, low impact approach to development, focus on allowing everyone to enjoy the outdoors and region, and economics.”

The development plan was approved by the San Juan County Planning and Zoning Commission on June 10.

Under Canvas, which received a “substantial investment” from the private equity firm KSL Capital Partners in 2018, advertises an experience that “minimizes impact on our environment” and promotes “water conservation” through pull-chain showers and low-flow toilets.

But Haren, who works in hospitality and restaurants in Moab and catered a recent event at the Under Canvas facility north of Arches National Park, questioned the company’s claims about sustainability and whether the resort would indeed have a “very low impact.”

Each of the 75 tents will have bathrooms and will be individually heated (with wood stoves) and cooled. In addition to the tents, the Looking Glass proposal features a central, 4,000-square-foot restaurant and lobby building. Wastewater will flow settle in septic tanks before liquid waste flows into a buried leach field.

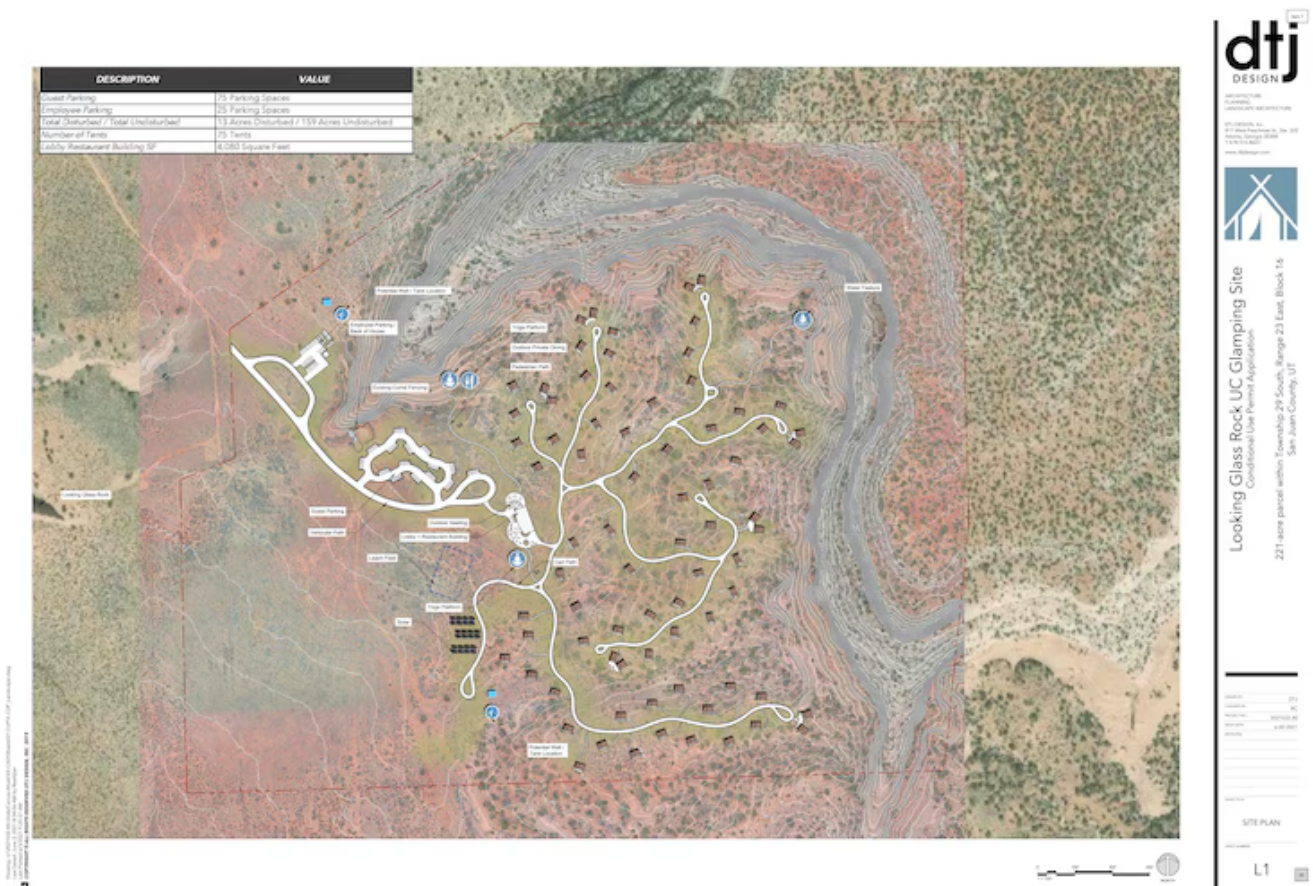


Photo caption: The proposed Under Canvas development plan near Looking Glass Rock as presented to San Juan County on May 27, 2021. (Under Canvas/San Juan County Planning and Zoning)

Haren said she was “horrified” after working as a caterer at the private, late-night party and seeing the number of people who wandered off-trail through the desert, trampling sensitive soil crusts and vegetation.

Multiple current and former Under Canvas employees, who talked to The Salt Lake Tribune on the condition of anonymity in order to speak candidly about the company, raised similar concerns and said Under Canvas does not always live up to the image presented on its flashy website and brochures. They also spoke about a prolonged septic system issue at the Under Canvas Moab location.

According to records on file with the Utah Division of Water Quality, the septic system at the resort failed last month, “causing a large amount of septic water to surface and flow downhill.”

Several former employees said the company knew about the issue for years and failed to address it, even as effluent bubbled to the surface of the ground less than a hundred yards from the luxury tents, giving off a strong urine smell.

“They’re not as eco-friendly as they try to [appear],” one employee said.

One worker said that water and sewer pipes at the Moab location routinely break in the winter because they are buried close to the surface, and graywater often leaks onto the ground under the tents.

McBrearty, the Under Canvas executive, downplayed the concerns. “An isolated septic issue was discovered earlier this year at our Under Canvas Moab site,” he said, “while completing routine plumbing maintenance, and has been addressed. We took immediate corrective action and have been working in partnership with the county. Under Canvas is committed to maintaining commercial, code-approved systems across our camp locations.”

Glamping ordinances and restrictions

Garfield County, which overlaps with Bryce Canyon National Park and Grand-Staircase Escalante National Monument, passed a glamping ordinance in 2019 to address safety concerns related to the trend in new luxury camping developments. The county commissioners noted at the time that hotels are typically built near city services such as fire departments and municipal wastewater plants, even in rural areas, but the remote location of glamping resorts aren’t always near those amenities.

Under Canvas is not the only luxury camping company with resorts in Utah. Capitol Reef Resort offers stays in covered wagons and teepees for upwards of \$300 per night. Amangiri Luxury Hotel and Resort, built near Lake Powell on former SITLA land and also backed by KSL Capital Partners, charges a whopping \$3,500 per night during peak season to stay in canvas-ceiling-ed pavilions.

In addition to the leases, SITLA has sold numerous parcels near national parks to private entities in recent years, including 391 acres of land surrounded by what is now Bears Ears National Monument. Joe Hunt, an executive for a medical transportation chain, purchased 19 state parcels around the state totaling 5,214 acres prior to 2016.

While advocating for the glamping ordinance several years ago, Garfield County Commissioner Leeland Pollock, a rancher and Republican, worried about the trend where remote parcels of SITLA land long used for grazing are sold or leased to private developers. Pollock added he hoped the ordinance could serve as a model in other counties. San Juan County does not currently have a specific glamping ordinance.

As SITLA representatives have repeatedly stated, the state trust lands are not public lands and can be sold or leased at any time, and luxury camping has a much bigger return for Utah's public schools than cattle grazing. In a recent interview with the Moab Sun News, Bryan Torgerson, a resource specialist for SITLA, summarized the agency's mission plainly.

SITLA, he said, manages "sacred lands that must be used for the sole purpose to generate money." And, at hundreds of dollars per night, leasing land to luxury camping companies does just that.

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 by clicking here.

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