

Scenic Area Land Exchange Faces Final Hurdle

Subdivision and Sprawl Are the Alternative

by Craig Roecker

Negotiations for an important land exchange of a significant west shore property at Mono Lake continue to stumble ahead. But in the past few weeks a great lurch forward has finally occurred. Now, with the progress that's been made, one final hurdle remains to protect this incredible property from development.

This project, three years in the making, has been stalled by disagreement between the owner and the US Forest Service (USFS) over fair market value for the land. The Cunningham family, long-time owners of the property, has felt that the land is worth more than was being allowed by USFS appraisal instructions because skyrocketing land prices in Mammoth have influenced values throughout Mono County.

The first appraisal did not take into account real development potential for the property nor a recent home sale in nearby Mono City. Because of limited real estate sales, the appraiser had a difficult time finding appropriate comparables in the Mono Basin. Now a new appraisal requested by the American Land Conservancy, who is helping to facilitate the

land exchange, has yielded a value that the Cunningham family feels is fair.

The last hurdle remaining is for the USFS to approve these new values so that the land exchange can be finalized.

The Unhappy Alternative

Without USFS approval, proposals to subdivide this spectacular 120 acre parcel will move forward, a step no one involved in the process wants to see. Subdivision conflicts with private property development guidelines for the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area and certainly would be an unfortunate way to celebrate the Scenic Area's 20th Anniversary in 2004.

The Mono Lake Committee supports efforts to exchange this important property. But the Committee cannot support a subdivision plan that will undermine the protection mandate established by the US Congress for the Scenic Area. And so the Committee will remain active in moving the land exchange forward—all the while hoping not to have to shift the focus to opposing this subdivision proposal. Stay tuned! ❖

Caltrans DEIR Nears Public Release & Your Input Will Be Critical!

Caltrans has completed a Draft Environmental Impact Report (DEIR) on the Mono Lake Widening Project and has submitted it to the Federal Highways Administration (FHWA) for review. FHWA will comment on the adequacy of the document and offer suggestions for improvement. Then the document will be released for public comment. Caltrans estimates that the DEIR will be released in September. Your comments on this important document will be needed when it is made available to the public!

The Mono Lake Widening Project is proposed for a 2.9 mile section along the west shore of Mono Lake. Thanks to public outcry last year, there are now two alternatives for the project detailed in the DEIR. While the specifics are still unknown, the major components of each alternative are clear. The first alternative describes the full extent of the project Caltrans has proposed. It includes a shift in road alignment to address rock fall issues and to increase the design speed of the highway, and also an alignment shift to increase the shoulder width to a uniform eight feet throughout the project area. This alternative also represents the greatest impact to the natural and scenic values in the area.

The second alternative tries to balance transportation goals while protecting the natural and scenic resources. At this time only a general outline of this alternative is known. It includes

alternative solutions to the rock fall problem. It avoids widening the roadway to eight foot shoulders in areas of critical environmental concern. However, it still increases the design speed of the highway, which requires fill slopes and retaining walls at the lake's edge.

Caltrans Denies Forest Service 4(f) Request

In August 2001 the US Forest Service requested that Caltrans apply federal 4(f) rules to this project, which would then require the highest levels of environmental sensitivity in planning and implementation. Caltrans, however, believes that this project will not impact the Scenic Area and, as such, does not qualify for special environmental review as required under 4(f) law. The Federal Highways Administration is still reviewing this decision and could overturn the 4(f) determination.

How You Can Help

Public comment on the DEIR will be critical in convincing Caltrans to choose the balanced alternative. Mono Lake Committee staff and experts will analyze the DEIR immediately upon its release and will make the analysis available to the public to help write the most effective letters. To be notified as soon as the DEIR is released please be sure we have your email address on file by emailing erika@monolake.org. Printed alerts will also be mailed.