

New Opportunity for Stalled Land Trade

Forest Service Action Needed

By Geoffrey McQuilkin

On March 8, the Forest Service-certified appraisal of the Cunningham property expired, opening the door for another attempt at making a land trade work. A trade would have win-win benefits for Mono Lake, the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area, and the Mono County community.

Previous efforts to broker a land trade have had a lot of support but little success. The Mono Lake Committee, American Lands Conservancy, Mammoth Hospital, US Forest Service, Mono County, and the Cunninghams, who own the property, have all supported a trade.

The land trade, which would add the Cunningham property to the Forest Service's holdings in the Scenic Area while making land available in nearby Mammoth Lakes for a community hospital expansion, has been stymied by disagreement over the value of the land. Last fall, a Forest Service appraisal valued the land at about half the owner's stated price.

The Cunningham property is located next to the highway near the west shore of Mono Lake, in the Mono Basin National Forest Scenic Area. The approximately 120 acres are undeveloped, with the exception of one small house, and are part of the sweeping scenic views available at Mono Lake. The property, which includes aspen groves, springs, and a small perennial stream, also provides valuable wildlife habitat.

The Forest Service has identified acquisition of parcels within the Scenic Area from willing sellers as its top land priority, and a land trade is the standard method for such acquisition.

New Opportunity

Last year's Forest Service appraisal has now expired and a new appraisal is needed. While it's not known what value a new appraisal might set for the property, it is clear that property values have been rising rapidly in Mono County.

The critical next step is for the Forest Service to bring key players together to meet and agree upon a set of fair appraisal instructions. From there, an appraisal must be done and a value certified for the property. Mammoth Hospital is ready to act quickly to purchase the property at the appraised price if the value is acceptable to the Cunninghams.

The Cunninghams, American Land Conservancy, Mono Lake Committee, and Mono County have worked together to deliver a packet of endorsement letters to elected officials, asking for their assistance in moving the process along.

The Subdivision Alternative

If the land trade is unsuccessful, a much-advertised subdivision could take place instead. Currently, however, the subdivision concept has been officially put on hold by the Cunninghams.

Should that hold be released, a subdivision would exploit a legal loophole where county zoning and Forest Service Scenic Area rules do not align and seek review and approval from Mono County planning officials while ignoring the protections put into place by Congress. The Mono Lake Committee remains extremely concerned about the subdivision possibility because it would violate the Scenic Area Management Plan and lead to lengthy public controversy. ❖

Geoff McQuilkin is the Committee's Co-Executive Director. He is looking forward to spring, and in particular, spring skiing.

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meeting with the LTC. A meeting is a much less formal alternative to a public hearing. In addition, Caltrans has not acknowledged whether the meeting will occur before or after the release of the Final EIR. By holding the meeting after the release of the Final EIR, Caltrans removes the opportunity for the LTC to be involved in choosing the final plan for the Project. Caltrans has stated that timing constraints are the reason why the meeting with the LTC may not occur prior to releasing the Final EIR.

Future Action

While the Committee has put forth great efforts in the past two and a half years towards developing a highway project that minimizes environmental impacts within the

scenic highway corridor, the Project as described in the DEIR remains unsatisfactory. The Committee hopes that Caltrans changes its course and commits to making the necessary improvements in order for the Project to move forward, otherwise, legal action will be necessary to protect Mono Lake. The Mono Lake Shoulder Widening Project is an opportunity for Caltrans to produce a model project—one that balances safety concerns and transportation goals while protecting scenic and environmental resources in the Mono Basin. ❖

Jen Nissenbaum is the Committee's Eastern Sierra Policy Coordinator. She and her dog Miller have been enjoying outdoor activities from skiing to climbing this spring.