

Protecting the lands of the Mono Basin

Development principles guide the Committee's approach to land development

by Clare Cragan



The phrase “land development” evokes images of sprawling cities, urban growth, or perhaps the iconic bulldozer in a pasture. The sweeping high desert landscape of the Mono Basin does not immediately come to mind. In fact, it is a place where many visitors come to get away from the very picture painted by the word “development,” and where local residents have chosen to live for the same reason.

Developing trends

In the past few years the Mono Basin has felt increasing development pressures as local real estate prices have skyrocketed. With so much publicly owned land it’s hard to believe such threats would exist—but remember the 3,700 acre Cedar Hill land parcel the *Wall Street Journal* reported as potentially “ideal for slicing up into golf courses and small housing communities?” Or how about the Cunningham property with proposed subdivisions just a stone’s throw from Mono Lake? Thankfully, the Committee has been able to achieve positive outcomes for these two parcels, but there are others out there. Development issues will be in the top tier of challenges facing Mono Lake and the Mono Lake Committee in the years ahead.

Case by case response

The Mono Lake Committee realizes that the question of whether land development in general is “good” or “bad” isn’t useful for creating sound policy in the Mono Basin. We can all think of perfectly acceptable land development projects: building a house on a residential lot in town, a local adding to their existing home, or Lee Vining finding a way to provide affordable housing. And we can all think of worrisome projects: remote subdivisions of wild land, large view-spoiling structures, and projects that break the laws which protect Mono Lake.

Specifics matter. In the Mono Basin, the Committee has the ability to review land development proposals on a case by case basis to evaluate their appropriateness and respond accordingly. The question then becomes: how do we review projects in a consistent way?

A principled approach

What the Committee has needed is a set of principles to guide our review and involvement with Mono Basin land development. Over the past year, Committee staff have worked on creating such a list.

We started with core Committee values: *Mono Lake, its tributary streams, the lands of the Mono Basin, and the sense of inspiration they create within us.*

Committee staff analyzed and discussed both how development projects might run contrary to our values and how they might express them. We’ve now created a set of principles that reflect our values and guide our one-at-a-time review of development proposals in the Mono Basin. With these principles clearly stated, the Committee is even better prepared to consider future development proposals in a straightforward way, and to take action accordingly.

Appropriate Mono Basin development does not produce significant:

- negative ecological impacts on the lake and surrounding plant and wildlife habitats;
- loss of the sense of solitude, scenic views, and other qualities that make up today’s unique and wild Mono Basin experience;
- negative impacts to water quantity or quality in the Mono Basin watershed;
- cumulative impacts through multiple or expanded development projects.

Appropriate Mono Basin development:

- allows the natural landscape to remain the dominant feature;
- fits with the existing Mono Basin character and sense of scale;
- complies with applicable development requirements for the location;
- is clustered around existing developed areas;
- seeks to minimize resource consumption. ❖