

Mapping Grand County's future

Pippa Thomas and Andrew Mirrington Moab Sun News | Posted: Wednesday, April 16, 2014 8:00 am

The future of how Grand County will balance the competing interests of recreation, energy development and environmental protection on public lands could lie within three maps released last week by the Grand County Council.

A subcommittee drafted the maps as possible options for long-term designations of public lands in Grand County, and local residents have started to weigh in on them.

At the regularly scheduled County Council meeting on Tuesday, May 6, the council will vote on a single alternative to be submitted to Congressman Rob Bishop's office for his consideration as he moves forward with a bill in Congress that would be the blueprint for lands-use in five eastern Utah counties.

“We did our best to make sure that all viewpoints are represented in these various alternatives,” council chairman Lynn Jackson said. “We utilized what we heard from the people who did respond [through letters], what we heard from various other conversations we heard around the community, and to a great extent, on some of the meetings that (we'd) been involved in with some of the big national and regional stake holders.”

Last November, the council established a three-member subcommittee to develop recommendations for long-term public land designations in the county. As part of its process, the subcommittee invited county residents to submit written comments by letter only.

The three different land-use maps for the county range from Map No. 1, which allows for the largest potential amount of mineral development and the smallest areas designated for wilderness and recreation, to Map No. 3, which is the most restrictive of mineral development and designates the largest areas for wilderness and recreation.

Local environmentalists reacted with disappointment to all three of the county options.

“Our position is: start with alternative three and improve upon it,” said Matt Gross, Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance (SUWA) media director.

“When you look at what is proposed as wilderness under America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, alternative three only reaches about 58 percent of what's been proposed,” Gross said. “We would, obviously, like to see that number be higher.”

Each of the three map alternatives designates a different-sized National Recreation Area (NRA), but

some who work with non-motorized recreation found fault with the County for leaving some popular trail-areas out of the maps.

“Alternative one of the National Recreation Area boundary excludes many important mountain-bike focus-areas that are currently designated by the BLM,” said Sandy Freethey, stating that she was speaking for herself and not for the Trail Mix organization that she chairs.

Freethey said areas that had been left out of the map included Bartlett Wash, Tusher Canyon, Klondike Bluffs, Monitor and Merrimac, parts of Porcupine Rim and upper segments of the Whole Enchilada trail.

The NRA boundary in Map No. 2 two adds acreage over and above that of Map No. 1 by extending only to the east, but still excludes major recreation areas north of state Route 313.

“Based on what they’re giving up in these maps, they are not recognizing recreation as a value,” Freethey said.

Jackson said he was, “aware that Trail Mix has been looking at the area that shoots almost due north of Moab over by Arches [National Park], and we utilized some of the information that we’d been getting from other non-motorized groups on where their primary focus was in the Gemini Bridges and the Big Flat area.”

Motorized trail users appeared more satisfied with the county's options for land use.

“The County Council did a good job with this draft,” said Clif Koontz, the executive director of Ride with Respect, an OHV advocacy group. “I hope the final proposal will call on Congress to specify the routes and/or mileage to remain open,” he said. “The question is, 10 or 20 years from now, will access still be provided on all the primitive roads, ATV trails, and motorized singletrack? Wilderness designations and energy corridors provide certainty, and a travel plan ought to offer the same certainty for recreation.”

Some advocates for industry and motorized access were critical of the influence of environmentalists, as well as the role of the federal government in the lands-planning process.

"I don't believe that transferring state land into federal ownership is a positive direction for our county," said Curtis Wells, president of the Grand County's Sagebrush Coalition. "I'm disappointed, but not surprised, by all three of these proposals. It's disturbing that the vocal minority have decided that our lands are best managed by the politically appointed bureaucrats of the BLM and not the people."

Map No. 1, the least restrictive version, uses the 218,000-acre Grand County wilderness plat that was prepared 15 years ago as a base. The subcommittee then designated a recreation area of 117,856 acres.

“Grand County is already on record, in 1999, as saying ‘we, as a county, are okay with these 218,000

acres as being wilderness,' so we started there," Jackson said.

At the other end of the spectrum, "We said, how much wilderness might we, as a study group, be comfortable with, and that was alternative three," Jackson said.

For Map No. 3, the group added to the 1999 county wilderness plat, all of the BLM wilderness study areas that are on-record in Grand County.

"And, we added some areas along Labyrinth Canyon that we knew people who support the Red Rock Wilderness bill were interested in," Jackson said.

They also added acreage on the eastern side of the county between Westwater and Beaver Creek for over of 484,000 acres of designated as wilderness.

They also extended the boundary for the NRA eastward and westward to cover over 309,000 acres. Currently, of all the maps, only alternative three includes major recreation areas north of state Route 313.

None of the recreation trails on Forest Service land in the La Sals were designated for recreation on any of the three maps.

Jackson said that at one point, the subcommittee discussed creating an alternative map that designated the full 800,000 acres of the proposed America's Red Rock Wilderness Act, but refrained.

"When you combine that with nearly a half-million acres of suggested national recreation area, we just thought 800,000 acres of wilderness on top of that was too much," Jackson said. "(Instead), we ended up with nearly a million acres of our 2.4 million acre county in some type of formal, protected, or designated status and we felt that was, for us, the other end of the spectrum from alternative one.

Having defined each end of their spectrum, the subcommittee then created map No. 2.

"We developed one in the middle, which is, in our opinion, a balanced, everybody-gets-a-piece-of-the-pie kind of thing," Jackson said.

Map No. 2 sets aside over 391,000 acres as designated wilderness and nearly 310,000 acres for the National Recreation Area. However, while the Maps No. 1 and No. 3 state that the NRA will be "closed to new leasing and industrial development," Map No. 2 leaves the future of mineral leasing "to be determined in [the] current BLM Master Leasing Plan process."

None of the maps change anything about the existing County/BLM Travel Plan for roads, and all three plans allow for certain "cherry stem" roads that that would be allowed to remain in place, even if those areas are designated as wilderness.

"These were only done on existing roads," Jackson said.

But environmentalists like Marc Thomas pointed out that the existing County/BLM Travel Plan includes “roads” that are in some cases nothing more than cow paths and unused, one-time mining roads, that could later be developed.

All three maps designate a one-mile to two-mile-wide transportation corridor through Sego Canyon of the Book Cliffs from I-70 to State lands.

John Weisheit, executive director of Living Rivers blasted the county's proposed options.

“The three alternatives are essentially industrialization, industrialization, and industrialization. The County Council has decided to hand our community over to multinational corporations to plunder low-value hydrocarbons and high-value water. “

All three of the county's proposed plans call for a prohibition on any future federal use of the Antiquities Act to designate national monuments in Grand County.

“Why should we relinquish a tool that has created four of the state's "Big 5?" said Thomas, referring to Arches, Capitol Reef, Bryce Canyon and Zion national parks, which were originally created as national monuments by presidential proclamations.

Environmental activists also noted the absence from all three maps of any protection for Moab's watershed in the La Sal mountains, and for the viewshed east and north of Arches National Park.

“This is the same area that caused a national uproar and sent Tim DeChristopher to prison when the George W. Bush Administration sold the famous 77 oil and gas leases in its waning days,” Kiley Miller said. “Under the county's best proposal, leasing and drilling in that region could be allowed.”

County residents will have a chance to give feedback on the different maps during a public meeting, scheduled for Wednesday, April 23 at the Grand Center. Following the meeting, people can provide written comments to the County Council until May 2. The maps can be viewed online through the county's Web site and hard copies are available at the council office.