

Residents unite to snag BLM's Area 51

By Alex Breitler, Record Searchlight
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SHASTA -- Residents here have unveiled a plan to take a hotly contested piece of land off the government's hands -- and keep it away from a private developer.

The newly formed Shasta Resources Council wants to establish a district that would buy so-called Area 51 from the Bureau of Land Management via a direct sale or an indirect land exchange.

The money would come from a special tax on property owners who live within the district's boundaries.

Located at the end of Victoria Drive west of Redding, Area 51 is popular with mountain bikers and walkers, and contains what some say is important salmon habitat on Salt Creek.

The BLM, however, is considering whether to trade Area 51 to a Humboldt County developer who intends to build homes there.

A decision could be made in the next two weeks, Redding-area BLM manager Steve Anderson said Friday. He confirmed that the council's proposal, delivered on March 15, has been included as one possible alternative in an environmental assessment that is nearly complete.

Members of the council question whether their plan is really being considered, noting that the BLM denied them a chance to formally present the plan in person. The council also requested -- but was apparently denied -- a six-month delay to give it time to refine its proposal.

"We're not being engaged," said Randall Hauser, the council's chair. "The community is not being heard."

The BLM's Anderson said there's been enough time.

"It's way past the public comment period," he said Friday. "This thing has been ongoing for over two years. You have to cut it off."

The BLM is debating whether to give 215-acre Area 51 to developer Joe Rice in exchange for 566 acres of timberland in the Grass Valley Creek watershed of Trinity County.

The BLM wants that land to control erosion into the Trinity River, and it also wants to dump scattered parcels like Area 51 in favor of larger, consolidated lands.

But critics have blasted the plan, saying salmon in Salt Creek are deserving of protection, too.

The council's plan calls for an entity such as the Shasta Community Services District to form a "community facilities district." These districts, authorized by state legislation in 1982, make public improvements by selling bonds that property owners repay through a special tax.

The district would have to be approved by two-thirds of the voters within its boundaries.

The council has its sights set far beyond Area 51 itself, and would also acquire other BLM lands in the Shasta area that the agency doesn't want, Hauser said.

Area 51 would remain open for many uses, including recreation, environmental protection and fire access.

A letter from Hauser to the BLM states the community's proposal should be given "a fair opportunity, if not priority consideration."

"It is difficult to conceive how the BLM can possibly make a land-use decision that is in the best interests of the public ... when the BLM refuses to legitimately consider an alternative proposal," the letter states.

Hauser said there appears to be public support in the Shasta area and that residents are willing to pay to keep Area 51 from being bulldozed.

"What we're offering is every bit a better a proposal than the one they've selected," he said.

Reporter Alex Breitler can be reached at 225-8344 or at abreitler@redding.com.
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