

Editorial

Area 51 proposal at least deserves BLM's attention

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A grassroots group trying to prevent housing development on a patch of Shasta known as Area 51 wants to wield an unusual weapon: housing development.

The Shasta Resources Council has devised a scheme to buy and preserve the brushy hills at the head of Salt Creek, currently owned by the federal government, and finance the deal by buying and subdividing other, nearby public property that the Bureau of Land Management also has tagged for disposal. The gist of the plan is to sell lots for housing along existing roads, in particular Lower Springs Road and Victoria Drive, while preserving the out-of-the-way patch of open space, whose trails are popular with hikers and bicyclists.

It's a creative plan that, on paper, would ensure local control and continued recreational use of Area 51 while making some room for growth. But is it viable? Hard to say.

The BLM, for its part, continues to study the potential land swap -- Area 51 for a piece of timberland in the Grass Valley Creek watershed in Trinity County -- that provoked all this activity, with a decision expected early next year. The owner of that property, Humboldt County developer Joe Rice, deserves to have his proposal handled fairly, and the fish experts say the Trinity River's trout and salmon would greatly benefit from preserving the Grass Valley Creek property.

The BLM can't just drop everything and embrace the Shasta Resources Council's plan, but it ought to do whatever possible to encourage local groups with an interest in land stewardship. The reason the BLM engages in swaps is that its scattered array of north state property is difficult and expensive to oversee. Consolidation is one tool for repairing that problem, but residents' passion to find creative solutions is another -- and one that will well serve the public good in the long run.