

Plans surface to buy Area 51

Resources Council urges home sales to purchase land

By Scott Mobley, Record Searchlight
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SHASTA — You can't call Area 51 preservationists anti-development.

The Shasta Resources Council this spring offered to buy the popular hiking and biking spot and other unwanted Bureau of Land Management land just west of Redding.

In a new twist, the group proposes financing the purchase of these 400 acres from the federal government by selling some of the property to local homebuilders.

The proposal is the latest in a series of moves by residents determined to keep the BLM from trading the 214-acre Area 51 for 566 acres along Grass Valley Creek in Trinity County.

"We feel if the BLM would just work with us on developing the financing, it will work," Randall Hauser, who chairs the Shasta Resources Council, said recently. "The taxpayer would be better served by a purchase."

The council earlier this month asked California Sens. Barbara Boxer and Dianne Feinstein to persuade the BLM to drop the land swap.

David Sandretti, communications director for Boxer, said her staffers are trying to set up a meeting between the council and the BLM.

Feinstein spokesman Howard Gantman said her office is also working on the matter.

"We are very aware of this issue," Gantman said. "We're finding out what is happening and what actions the senator might take. But we need to hear from both sides on this issue."

Area 51 sits near the headwaters of Salt Creek, between Swasey Drive and Lower Springs Road just south of Highway 299.

Over the decades, locals have built about five miles of hiking and biking trails that snake among the oak, pine, manzanita and creek tributaries on the land, which they have affectionately named for the secret air base in Nevada. The name has stuck — even the BLM has adopted it.

The BLM has wanted to unload Area 51 and other nearby lands since 1993. The agency's Redding Field Office that year adopted a policy to consolidate its roughly 1,000 properties by trading away isolated parcels in development's pathway.

Joe Rice, the Humboldt County developer who owns the Trinity County land, offered his property to the BLM in 2002.

The agency doesn't have cash to buy new land, Susie Rodriguez, realty specialist at the BLM's Redding Field Office, said recently.

So the agency met with Rice to identify property it could trade for the Trinity County land, which Rice in the past has proposed to log. Area 51 — on the "urban interface" just west of Redding — seemed a perfect candidate for a swap. Rice last year proposed 59 single-family lots on the property.

One of the questions at the heart of the land swap is whether the Trinity County land is more ecologically valuable than Area 51.

Environmental agencies have called the Grass Valley Creek area a crucial salmon spawning ground. Transferring the Rice land to BLM ownership would likely stem erosion that could harm that habitat, the state Department of Fish and Game has said.

Fish and Game has also declared Area 51 valuable for salmon and steelhead.

But the agency this year dropped its earlier opposition to the land swap in exchange for a covenant forbidding development that could interfere with fish migration along Salt Creek.

Hauser, the Shasta Resources Council director, doubts such restrictions would really protect fish.

"It's darn hard to establish fish migration protection with cutting and filling for roads and 60 building pads," Hauser said. "The impact on fisheries is going to be there with or without the covenant. It's going to be substantial."

The BLM has prepared an environmental study of the land trade and two alternatives — doing nothing and selling Area 51 to the public at market value. An amendment to the BLM disposal policy earlier this year would permit such a sale.

The agency has yet to decide whether to swap, sell or drop the whole deal, said Rodriguez, the realty specialist. That decision — expected in January or February — will depend in large part on an appraisal of Area 51 and the Trinity County property, she said.

Land values are generally higher near Redding's burgeoning west side than out on Grass Valley Creek, where development pressure is nearly nonexistent. But should Area 51's appraisal come in too much higher than the Trinity County property, "that could blow the whole thing out of the water," Rodriguez said.

The value difference between the federal and private land in any proposed exchange cannot exceed 25 percent, she said.

Should the Area 51 appraisal come in more than 25 percent above Grass Valley Creek, the agency could trade fewer Shasta County acres to Rice to bring the land values back to the acceptable range.

The Shasta Resources Council thinks land purchase by interested local residents is a better way to take unwanted land off the government's hands than a land swap with a private developer.

But the group has yet to work out the mechanics of such a purchase. The BLM has refused to discuss the matter while conducting an environmental study for the land swap.

Under the council's latest proposal, a land trust, special district or nonprofit group would buy Area 51 at its appraised value. The council itself is not yet incorporated as a nonprofit group, said Hauser, the director.

The trust or other organization would also seek from the BLM more than 200 acres in three other parcels just to the east along Lower Springs Road. One of these properties includes portions of the popular Westside Trail, just west of Mary Lake.

The property buyer would serve as a "bridge," eventually transferring the land to the Shasta Resources Council, Hauser said.

To repay the trust and create an endowment to maintain the land, the council would sell lots along Lower Springs Road, Swasey Drive or Highway 299 to homebuilders. Those sales would account for less than 10 percent of the total acreage acquired, the group's purchase proposal states.

Proceeds from the property sales to the homebuilders would let the council hire crews to whack flammable brush and improve fire roads in the area. Shasta is one the most fire-prone spots in greater Redding.

The council earlier this year had explored forming an assessment district to pay for BLM property purchases and fire fuel reduction. But that idea has faded into the background, Hauser said.

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