

Conservation Easements will protect state lands around McCall

Endowment Committee's Viewpoint Article

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Idaho is changing at a pace with which most residents are uncomfortable. Our mountain community may feel these changes are being driven by forces beyond their control. The old adage states "Change may be inevitable" but the direction is not. Together we can manage this change by honoring tradition and embracing new opportunities and finding a balance between the two. Finding ways to balance conservation and development is a tremendous task which requires co-operation and compromise.

This region faces an inordinate amount of issues from housing, transportation, economic, access and environmental, all of which will shape Valley County and McCall for the future. Discussions on the future management of Endowment Lands has highlighted these issues.

Payette Land Trust (PLT) was born out of the need for workable solutions on private land. PLT has worked hard to strike a balance between traditional uses and protecting the core natural values of the property. Now, PLT wants to bring its 28 years of experience in weaving together agriculture, timber and recreation into perpetual non-development conservation easements to help with the management of transitional Endowment Lands around Payette Lake.

Timber, Agriculture and Recreation are vital industries for Valley County. Conversion of these lands from forest to development is their biggest threat. Timber is not cut, cows are not grazed, horses and bikes are not ridden and huckleberries are not picked in someone's backyard. Non-development conservation easements are designed to protect the unique conservation values of the land while allowing for uses which do not harm those values. By no means is PLT anti-development, we understand people need places to live and work, but we believe there are exceptional and unique areas which deserve to be permanently shielded from development.

East Side drive is a fantastic example of how a conservation easement could be used to conserve this unique area. A conservation easement would ensure past traditional activities would continue while being managed in harmony with the natural environment. This includes sustainably managed grazing and timber harvest, hazardous fuels reduction, low impact recreation and day use activities such as hiking, biking and walking.

In its current state, the Lake is out of balance. Any further development along its shores will be detrimental. Of the 22 miles of shoreline, 6 are within Ponderosa State park and 16 are along the outer shore. Remove the current privately owned/ developed shoreline and the three stretches of road adjacent to the shore, leaves .87 miles or 5.4% of the shoreline. The .87 miles includes two sections .56 in IDL Parcel G and .31 in IDL Parcel H. Sadly, these constitute the last of the undisturbed public shoreline.

PLT intends to submit an application to IDL for the purchase of a non-development conservation easement from the Endowment Trust on parcels G and H (effectively East Side Drive) which would conserve its natural state and the traditional uses in perpetuity. The easement purchase value would require a price determination based on a fair market appraisal using Uniform Standards of Professional Appraisal Practice standards.

To purchase this easement at fair market value will take a huge fundraising effort, but PLT believes in the strong conservation ethic of the region. Given the chance, we believe residents, businesses and visitors alike will rise to the challenge of conserving this jewel of our community. By purchasing the easement at fair market value, the fiduciary requirement of the Land Board will be met. The Endowment will continue to own the land and benefit from any future revenue derived from the leasable activities remaining under the easement. If the Endowment chooses to sell or trade the land in the future, the easement will remain attached to the property and the Payette Land Trust will be here to steward the deed into the future.

Purchasing a conservation easement on Endowment land in Idaho has never been done before. Given the time to partner with IDL and the community to work through the issues of establishing protocols for conservation easements, we can be successful in creating a tool which will result in a win for the Land Board, a win for the community and most importantly a win for the Lake and the Land.

- Payette Land Trust Endowment Land Use Committee (Board members Suzanne Rainville, Gary Thompson and executive director Craig Utter)