



BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

1300 NW Wall Street, Bend, Oregon
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FOR RECORDING STAMP ONLY

COMMUNITY CONVERSATION ON RECREATIONAL CAMPGROUND OPPORTUNITIES WITH DESCHUTES COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

5:30 PM

TUESDAY, JULY 30, 2024

Barnes Sawyer Rooms
Live Streamed Video

Present were Commissioners Patti Adair, Anthony DeBone and Phil Chang. Also present were County Administrator Nick Lelack; Deputy County Administrator Erik Kropp; Deputy County Administrator Whitney Hale; Strategic Initiatives Manager Jen Patterson; and Executive Assistant Brenda Fritsvold.

This meeting was audio and video recorded and can be accessed at the Deschutes County Meeting Portal website www.deschutes.org/meetings.

Commissioner Adair called the meeting to order at 5:30 pm and welcomed everyone in attendance, acknowledging the presence of representatives from Oregon Parks & Recreation, Bend Parks & Recreation, Deschutes Trail Coalition, and Visit Central Oregon.

Commissioner Adair then reviewed the agenda, noting the meeting will begin with a presentation from ECONorthwest, the consultant contracted by the County to conduct a Camping Feasibility Study.

Update on Camping Feasibility Study

Mark Buckley from ECONorthwest said the Camping Feasibility Study looked at tourism demand and potential opportunities in Deschutes County which result from the scarcity of short-term accommodations for persons recreating outdoors. The study included an

evaluation of three County-owned properties for possible use as recreational campgrounds, including the property on Fort Thompson Lane.

Buckley reviewed data on Deschutes County's population and visitor growth and described tourism and economic impacts over the past 20 years, saying that although the Deschutes National Forest is a high-profile resource for outdoor recreation, most of its campgrounds are not accessible outside of the summer months. Buckley shared statistics on the projected number of future visitors to the County as well as economic contributions of persons visiting the Deschutes National Forest.

Continuing, Buckley said the study evaluated current campground availability and occupancies. He shared information on the Fort Thompson Lane property, including its zoning, access, natural resources, regulatory considerations, and development potential. He estimated that the property has about 98 areas of "opportunity acreage" and offered potential in-season and off-season camping rates.

Buckley then shared a graph showing occupancy rates that could be expected at Fort Thompson for 50, 100 and 150 RV sites, and spoke to estimates of how much each development might cost as well as how many years it would take to break even following the initial capital investment. Buckley noted these numbers do not account for state or federal grants which might be secured.

Buckley concluded that use of the Fort Thompson property appears to offer a strong return on investment potential, particularly when possible public-private partnership opportunities are factored in.

Group Discussions

Following the presentation from ECONorthwest, persons who signed up to talk with the Commissioners were called up in groups. Persons who live in proximity to the Fort Thompson Lane property were invited to join the Commission—they were Sam Davis, Bruce Halperin, Alex Tarnoff, Lindsey Wilcox, Gary Knight, Rich Neiderhof, Ken Moore, Connie Settle, Chip Arthur and Greg Vann.

Discussion points included: the fact that the County's Comprehensive Plan states that Deschutes County does not provide parks or recreation programs; the desire that recreational opportunities be expanded for the benefit of those who live here and visit here; the fact that the Camping Feasibility Study is only a preliminary analysis of the market and includes the idea of partnering with a private developer for a future campground on County-owned land; the assumption that an RV park would attract dispersed campers from federal lands; the possibility that the Murphy Road site could more than accommodate the demand for RV sites as projected in the ECONorthwest analysis; the failure to include other known RV parks together having a total of 600 sites in the analysis; the lack of natural

amenities such as a river or lake at the Fort Thompson property; a statewide analysis which addresses the need for camping around Oregon and includes regional data on this subject; the fact that many potential campers are turned away at Tumalo State Park for lack of space; the recognition that more analysis is needed to determine if a campground at Fort Thompson would be feasible; the perception of the Fort Thompson property as dry, dusty, and arid, and that it experiences traffic noise from adjacent Highway 97; concerns that transients may use the property and dump trash onto it; the supposition that a campground at Fort Thompson would not be a destination in and of itself but would only serve as an overflow site from Tumalo and the Fair; the worry that people would utilize private property to access Fort Thompson; the owner of the Groves property's opposition to granting the County an easement for access to Fort Thompson; the demand for vacant land to develop for residential or commercial use and the concern that the Fort Thompson property could be sold to generate revenue for other purposes; the limitations of the initial analysis done for the camping feasibility study and the need for more, in-depth analysis of the campground concept; the possibility that the site could be dedicated as open space in perpetuity and utilized only for education and passive recreation with no campground; the fact that the property is in the Wildland Urban Interface area; the validity of the pro forma numbers, which are based on limited data; and the concern that developing this site to any extent could preclude restoring it to its natural state.

The second group of persons invited to join the Commissioners at the table were representatives of tourism and recreational interests—they were Emmy Andrews from the Central Oregon Trail Alliance (COTA), Jana Johnson from the Deschutes Trails Coalition, Kim McCarrel from NW Horse Trails, Rachel Colton from the Bend Parks & Recreation District, and JR Collier from Oregon Parks & Recreation.

Discussion ensued regarding whether the Fort Thompson property would be suitable for trails; how this site compares to the Maston trail system outside of Prineville and the fact that the Bureau of Land Management had asked to partner with COTA to develop the Maston trails to discourage the dumping of trash and other negative activities, with the result being an amenity enjoyed by many people every day; the value of trails, open space and recreational amenities; the demand for and economic viability of campsites; the lack of trail opportunities in northeast Bend for people to bike or walk their dogs; the proximity of the Fort Thompson property to Bend and other amenities; the concern about possible future pressure to develop the Fort Thompson property for a use other than passive recreation; sources of possible funding opportunities for establishing a park at Fort Thompson; the consideration that park properties with low development tend to have more problems than those which are more developed because staff is assigned to the latter but not the former; the fact that campgrounds help pay for parks because the campsites generate revenue from fees; the lack of campsites at Smith Rock, which is for day use only yet draws 1.5 to 2.0 million visitors each year; the estimates that it could take ten to 12 years before a campground at Fort Thompson would start paying for itself; the need for a complete financial analysis and operating plan to fully inform a decision on

whether to proceed with developing a campground and park; the question of access to the property; and the difference between a destination campground and a transition campground, with the latter having only basic amenities.


Closing Remarks

Commissioner DeBone reminded of the information provided by the Community Development Department regarding authorized uses of resource land and the conclusion that up to 50 campsites would be allowed at the Fort Thompson property. He questioned if the County wants to allow private property owners to develop this kind of use on private property, stressed the importance of addressing unsanctioned camping, and agreed that the access issue to the Fort Thompson site is a concern.

Commissioner Adair said Oregon already has thousands of acres available for trail riding. She said using Highway 97 for access to a park and campground at Fort Thompson would be problematic.

ADJOURN: Being no further discussion, the meeting was adjourned at 7:22 p.m.

DATED this 18th day of Sept. 2024 for the Deschutes County Board of Commissioners.



PATTI ADAIR, CHAIR



ANTHONY DEBONE, VICE CHAIR

ATTEST:



RECORDING SECRETARY



PHIL CHANG, COMMISSIONER