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Feds readying Wexner land swap for a public review

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A proposed land exchange between a wealthy midvalley family and the federal government is expected to come up for a public review at the end of the summer.

The Wexner family in February submitted a land swap proposal to the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), seeking to privatize more than 1,400 acres of BLM land in Pitkin County.

The BLM land splits sections of the existing 3,944-acre Wexner trophy ranch on the north flanks of Mount Sopris, known as “Two Shoes.”

In exchange for ownership of that plot, the Wexners propose giving the feds the undeveloped 557-acre Sutey Ranch in Garfield County and 117 acres of popular mountain biking terrain in the Prince Creek area.

Leslie Wexner is a philanthropist and billionaire who runs Limited Brands, imprints of which include Victoria’s Secret and Bath & Body Works. He and Abigail live full-time in Columbus, Ohio.

It’s the Wexners’ second stab at swapping the land locally. After nearly a year and a half of local negotiations, they withdrew a similar proposal last year, which would have required an act of Congress for final approval.

The withdrawal resulted largely from Pitkin County’s lack of support, which was considered vital to gain support on Capitol Hill.

The BLM has been studying the new proposal since February. It appears likely to pass the initial hurdle in the review process, known officially as a “feasibility study.” Members of the public are expected to be invited to comment on it this fall.

BLM spokesman David Boyd said the agency rejects most land swaps that are brought to it off the bat, because of clear losses to the public from giving up public land or threatening habitat.

The Wexner exchange hasn’t raised any such red flags from the feds yet, he said.

“The question we’re really getting at right now is, ‘Is this enough in the public interest for us to move forward?’” Boyd said.

Though the acreage of the swap is uneven and would lose net accessible land for the public, the Wexners’ attorney, Gideon Kaufman, argued throughout the failed Pitkin County process that the Sutey Ranch was far more valuable for both recreational and wildlife needs.

For the BLM proposal, the Wexners sweetened the deal by offering to give the BLM a 117-acre parcel east of Prince Creek Road, which includes a popular network of mountain biking trails. The trails are currently on private land, though bikers have been riding on them for years. The Wexners bought that parcel from the Haynes family last year, and could potentially close it to bikers.

Kaufman said he and the Wexners have been scarcely involved since they submitted the proposal nearly five months ago.

“Nothing has changed from our perspective,” Kaufman said. “They occasionally ask us for information, but this is their process.”

Negotiations between Pitkin County and the Wexners broke down last year as elected officials pressed for a more equitable exchange of acreage.

Boyd said the BLM is not concerned primarily with acreage.

“Land exchanges are rarely done acre for acre,” Boyd said. “It’s value for value. But we have to look at what it is the public would be giving up and what it would be gaining.”

Value-wise, the Wexners claim they would be giving the public a \$7.4 million value for about \$4.2 million. The Wexners also offered about \$1.2 million cash for BLM management costs.

Pitkin County open space director Dale Will argued during negotiations last year that the appraisal of Wexners’ ranch was unfairly skewed downward. It should have been appraised taking into account the added value of privatizing the swaths of public land surrounding it.

Pitkin County was the only agency to withhold support from the swap last year. It drew endorsements from Garfield and Eagle counties, the town of Carbondale and the Aspen Valley Land Trust.

“We’re hoping that the BLM will pick up the torch and negotiate on behalf of the public,” Will said last week.

While the BLM is evaluating the proposal based on its own criteria, Boyd said they agency isn’t operating entirely in a vacuum.

He said agency officials are well aware of the controversy stirred up by the swap in the Roaring Fork Valley — and aware of both Pitkin County’s opposition and other area governments’ support for it.

“We’re certainly aware of all the support for it, but that will formally come in with the public comment period,” Boyd said.

The proponents of administrative exchanges, in this case the Wexners, pay for all the professional work evaluating the swap-proposed land, Boyd said. The proponents also reimburse BLM staff time, meaning there should be no cost to taxpayers for evaluating a proposed swap.

In all, the administrative process for a land exchange — with several cycles of BLM review and public comment — is expected to take two to three years.

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