

**OFFICE OF THE BOARD OF COUNTY COMMISSIONERS
OF BLAINE COUNTY
SPECIAL MEETING OF THE JANUARY 2014 SESSION**

ROCK CREEK APPLICATION TO LAND, WATER AND WILDLIFE LEVY PROGRAM

Fourth Day (Evening Meeting)

Tuesday Evening, January 21, 2014

Pursuant to Statutory Provisions, the Board of Blaine County Commissioners (BCC) met this day at 5:30 p.m. Present were Chairman Lawrence Schoen; Vice-Chairman Jacob Greenberg; Commissioner Angenie McCleary; County Administrator Derek Voss; Chief Deputy Prosecuting Attorney Tim Graves; County Clerk JoLynn Drage; Clare Swanger, Land Water and Wildlife Program Coordinator; Blaine County Land Use and Building Services Director Tom Bergin; Chuck Turner; Steve Elam, Mont Fleming, Terry Gregory, and Gregg Servheen, Idaho Fish and Game; Keri York, and Scott Boettger, Wood River Land Trust; Lou Lunte and Diane Boyd, The Nature Conservancy; Kris Berg, Brendan Brazee and Wade Brown, NRCS; Mark Davidson, Carmen Northern and Ed Northern, Trout Unlimited; Barbara Acker and Lili Simpson, Land, Water and Wildlife Program; John Kurtz, BLM; International Model Drag Race Association representative David Sundholm; Gerhardt Morrison; Greg Hosman; Judy Harrison; Trent Jones; Mark Brown; Matt Marks; John Vladimiroff; Wanda Tierney; Jill Bryson; Pat Murphy; Carol Brown; Vance Hanawalt; Ann Erickson; Jim Phillips; Roger Olson; Brett Stevenson, Wood River Bike Coalition; Rod Hawkins; Rob Struthers; and *Idaho Mountain Express* reporter Greg Moore.

Chairman Schoen called the meeting to order at 5:30 p.m.

**CONSIDERATION OF ROCK CREEK APPLICATION TO LAND, WATER AND WILDLIFE
LEVY PROGRAM - BLAINE COUNTY LEVY ADVISORY BOARD**

Rock Creek Ranch project, with partners, Wood River Land Trust (WRLT) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC): A public hearing on and consideration of an application for Conceptual Approval from the Land, Water & Wildlife Levy for \$1,100,000, or 50%, whichever is less, of the cost of Idaho Fish & Game Department's purchase of the 10,400-acre ranch which starts six miles southwest of Hailey and runs south along Rock Creek and its tributaries to Highway 20. Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG) intends to own and manage the property long-term as a Wildlife Management Area for multiple uses including grazing and a variety of public recreation. The IDFG purchase will occur from WRLT and TNC after they acquire it from the current landowner and a Grasslands Reserve Program conservation easement is placed on the property. The total value of this entire project is estimated at \$12,600,000.

The Board-appointed Levy Advisory Board completed its positive recommendation on November 21, 2013.

Clare Swanger stated that this request is from the Wood River Land Trust (WRLT) and The Nature Conservancy (TNC) in the lesser amount of \$1,100,000 or 50% of the agreed upon price after appraisal, for Idaho Fish and Game (IDFG) to purchase the Rock Creek Ranch from the Rinker family. All six criteria established by the Levy Advisory Board (LAB) were met, and the LAB has recommended funding project.

Keri York, WRLT, presented the application for funding. She identified the area affected by the request, as well as surrounding land owners and uses. There are currently 185 parcels in the upper portion of the ranch and 5 in lower section. This purchase would prevent the parcels from being developed and would maintain the land in a perpetual conservation easement. There are numerous values to the land, and the easement would protect numerous resources, including scenic views, wildlife habitat, water, agricultural resources, and recreation. Motorized traffic will be limited.

Lou Lunte, TNC, explained the transaction and details of financing. Original listing price was \$12,600,000 for this particular 10,400 acres next to the Wood River valley. The current owner offered a significant reduction in price if time constraints are met. NRCS worked with the owner to establish Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). Idaho Fish and Game became a partner in the project as well. The current landowner will establish the GRP, then sell to WRLT/TNC for \$2,200,000, who will sell to IDFG for \$1,100,000, leaving the \$1,100,000 request to the LWW to make the WRLT/TNC whole.

Wade Brown, NRCS Boise Office, explained that agency's involvement through Grassland Reserve Program (GRP). He provided an overview of the GRP process. He explained that GRPs are completed with a conservation easement deed, which cannot be changed. The purpose of a GRP is to protect grazing and related conservation uses by protecting and preserving property conservation values. Easements are in perpetuity. Monitoring for easements is on an annual basis.

Brendan Brazee explained that grazing management plans, including sage grouse protection measures, will be created. All plans include consideration for Sage-Grouse Initiative, focusing on sage grouse habitat. NRCS will work with the landowner to develop the plan and work toward the established goal, including monitoring and contingency plans. Plans will include continued grazing, will improve wildlife habitat, and other positive features.

Greg Servheen, IDFG, presented their view and mission of managing lands for wildlife habitat and recreation. This will be the first purchase in many years. IDFG would manage property in perpetuity if purchased, so the IDFG commitment is larger than the cost – it is ongoing. There is riparian and upland habitat in this area, including sage grouse habitat. The Wildlife Management Area (WMA) would deal with management of deer, elk and antelope in addition to numerous small animals and birds. The WMA Plan will take approximately 24 months to complete, with public input concerning water, grazing and public access. The Management Plan must protect the easement, and will be long term.

Bart Rinker, on behalf of Rinker Family, explained that the family is pleased to give back to the community and thanked the community for all they have done for the family. He is happy that the property will be used and managed in a manner that will make the family, his dad in particular, proud.

McCleary identified three areas of question/concern: 1) water rights (will they stay with the property, what will influence that decision); 2 – management plans (what is Blaine County involvement in creation of management plans) and grazing plan (who is involved in grazing plan?); and 3) partnerships and contribution (TNC and WR LT are not contemplating financial contribution at this point). She feels this is extraordinary opportunity for the county, that the application meets all the goals of the LWW, but is concerned at the size of this request. She would like to see TNC and WRLT contribute financially.

Greenberg expressed similar concerns to McCleary: 1) What will travel plan look like, is there a map showing trails and depicting allowable uses? Are roads excluded from GRP easements? 2) NRCS is concerned about preserving/enhancing habitat for sage grouse but he is concerned IDFG may allow hunting of sage grouse. He stated that some of the area may be used to attract elk in hopes of keeping them off the highway and away from private lands, and questioned how IDFG will manage hunting in area: 3) Water rights need to be tied to land; 4) If IDFG sells the land, how could LWW recoup the money they invested in project? 5) BLM grazing management plans are up for review in 2015, how that will affect the property?

Schoen wants to see accountability for taxpayer funds invested in project. He expressed concern about how all parts would mesh, and how priorities would be determined between possibly conflicting issues. He wants to see non-lethal means of predator management prioritized over lethal means.

Keri York explained that water rights are tied to the property through the easement process. Water rights be listed and protected further by an additional document. WRLT and TNC have a long term interest in restoration and through purchase/sell agreement will address water rights in that agreement as well.

Gregg Servheen (IDFG) says local involvement is critical in developing management plans. Uses identified by public will be addressed – public involvement is important.

Scott Boettger, WRLT, explained that leverage opportunity is a huge opportunity for Blaine County residents in the form of recreation and public access, rather than cash.

PUBLIC COMMENT

Several members of the public commented on the request. There was an enormous amount of support expressed for the project. The majority of the public would like to see the project funded, and feel that this is an opportunity that should not be missed.

Concerns expressed by the public included whether or not IDFG would manage the hunting and trapping activities well, if IDFG would be able to sell the property in the future, if there would be restoration work or only conservation type activities, if there would be an unforeseen burden to taxpayers during the property transfer process, and if the \$12,600,000 property would be removed from the tax rolls creating higher levy rates for the residents.

Mark Davidson, Trout Unlimited, expressed support for the project and thinks it will provide a platform for projects on both Rock Creek and the Big Wood River. Trout Unlimited is willing to contribute up to \$10,000 to the project for helping with passage of fish through culverts

Motorized vehicle users expressed concern about being able to use the area. The property is bordered on both sides by BLM. The BLM land is open for use by motorized vehicles, and enforcement is going to be difficult. He would like there to be consideration for motorized vehicles on established trails.

Would there be grazing fees for use of the land?

CLOSED PUBLIC COMMENT

IDFG would be able to sell, but still owns the first WMA they purchased in 1930. That land is also covered by GRP easement. Chance is slim that IDFG would sell. If IDFG is the owner of record, they will not be required to pay property taxes but they will pay a fee in lieu of taxes to the county.

Restoration type activities are definitely allowed and IDFG will work with private donors to make improvements to land.

Grazing fees will be charged, but may be money or in-kind work performed on behalf of permittee.

Current motorized use is mainly during fall for hunting. The property will be open to everything except motorized vehicles, but that may need to be addressed in some areas. A route (or routes) for motorized use can be excluded from GRP.

Greenberg stated that there are a lot of moving parts and issues will need to be worked out. The partnership effort has been fabulous, but would like to see TNC and WRLT provide a monetary contribution. Water rights need to be tied to property. Outstanding job on proposal, it is very creative. The property is high quality, it is exactly what voters had in mind when the levy passed. He supports conceptual approval of project.

Schoen supports conceptual approval of the project, but wants to ensure goals of levy program are met. He wants to make sure the IDFG understands that Blaine County has the same kind of accountability that IDFG does, and would like to see a MOU with IDFG so Blaine County interests are not lost. IDFG representative will recommend that a MOU be created and Blaine County concerns are addressed.

McCleary supports conceptual approval and does not want to miss out on this opportunity. She supports the MOU concept so Blaine County input is incorporated in management plans. She would like to see some type of commitment that WRLT and TNC stay involved in this project.

The Levy Advisory Board (LAB) had concerns similar to those expressed by the Board of County Commissioners. A joint meeting with LAB and BCC will be scheduled to facilitate more expedient resolution to issues. .

Greenberg moved, seconded by McCleary, to grant conceptual approval of Rock Creek Ranch Project. Motion carried unanimously.

ADJOURN

At the hour of 7:36 p.m., the BCC finding no more business before them adjourned.

Attest: _____ Approved _____
JoLynn Drage Lawrence Schoen
County Clerk Chairman