

Viewpoint: IDL should develop a broader vision for McCall endowment lands

By Julie Manning

The Idaho Department of Lands has recently taken important steps regarding McCall's endowment lands. Last week, IDL convened the final meeting of a focus group to discuss its draft Payette Endowment Lands Strategy, and I participated as a representative of the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance.

The PELS is a proposed management plan for 5,478 acres of endowment lands right in town and surrounding Payette Lake.

According to IDL, endowment lands within or near McCall's urban areas are becoming too valuable compared to the revenues they generate.

Also, the proximity of endowment lands to urban areas is hindering IDL's ability to manage these lands in the usual way: logging. IDL earns the lion's share of its revenues from selling timber.

Make no mistake, IDL is earning money from these 5,478 acres surrounding Payette Lake. However, IDL is inclined to deem them "underperforming" assets, seemingly considering these distinctive lands like you might consider shares of companies trading on the New York Stock Exchange.

So, IDL drew lines across the map, divided 5,478 acres around Payette Lake into 13 separate parcels, and suggested changing the way it manages these parcels over the next 20 years, possibly selling and leasing them and discussing strategies with stakeholders.

It is important to keep in mind that IDL manages endowment lands for the land board, comprised of Idaho's top five elected state officials. The land board currently holds 2.5 million acres of endowment lands throughout Idaho in trust and has a constitutional duty to "secure the maximum long term financial return" from these lands for the beneficiaries, primarily public education.

Would selling off these McCall lands help education? Not much. Last year the land board cut a check to public schools for \$52.5 million. About \$21 million of this amount were revenues from the 2.5 million acres of statewide endowment lands. The 5,478 acres in McCall represent about 0.002 of this, and so a rough estimate suggests they contributed a tiny fraction to the \$21 million in land revenues and barely made a dent in the \$2 billion annual school budget.

The real problem is that as competition heats up for land in Idaho and McCall - exacerbated by COVID-19 causing people to leave cities and work remotely - the state is finding it increasingly difficult to manage them.

We are starting to build important relationships. The focus group was comprised of diverse stakeholders including leaders from local government, conservation and sportsmen's groups, and local businesses, as well as top IDL executives and staffers.

At the final meeting, the stakeholders' comments indicated an emerging consensus:

1. Develop a broader vision.
2. IDL should coordinate with the City of McCall and Valley County, which have already developed a vision and completed extensive planning.
3. IDL should define protocols for recreation leases and conservation easements that generate revenues while protecting open lands and the watershed.
4. We need more time to collaborate and find creative solutions.

A couple stakeholders suggested a constitutional amendment to modernize the land board's constitutional mandate and account for the scarcity and importance of land in the 21st Century.

The distinctive endowment lands around Payette Lake are quintessential and unique. Other lands or money are no substitute for them. Let's stop thinking of them as fungible assets.

PELA believes that protecting these lands, Payette Lake, and the watershed should be the foundation of the PELS. Undeveloped endowment lands provide a buffer for the lake, McCall's sole source of drinking water, and protect water quality.

At the North Fork Payette Watershed Summit, Gov. Little recognized Payette Lake as "the top of the ditch" that affects water quality throughout the region.

Additionally, the PELS should recognize climate change as a factor. If this isn't obvious today, it will be soon - just look at Texas or Paradise, California. IDL should continue its stewardship on these endowment lands because that will protect Idaho from floods, fires, droughts, and other natural disasters.

IDL should establish a longer term advisory group to collaborate on the PELS, incorporate the focus group's suggestions and public comments, and devise new ways to generate revenues and simultaneously fulfill other goals.

Recent government-citizen collaborations have successfully addressed similar issues in other places, including in Blaine County, Idaho, San Juan Islands, Washington, and Whitefish, Montana.

When the PELS is complete, IDL should stand behind it: it should be enforceable and a framework by which IDL evaluates opportunities.

We must take time to get this right. IDL has dedicated time in other areas, such as a land swap deal in the Owyhees with the federal government that started in 2008 and received land board approval last month. What we do here will provide a template and a precedent for Idaho.

What can you do? Communicate with city and county officials because Gov. Little said he values their recommendations. Ask the land board commissioners to lead by showing moral courage.

We expect the land board to exercise its constitutional mandate in a way that respects and protects our distinctive and irreplaceable lands and watershed.

(Julie Manning, of Boise and McCall, is a director and vice president of the Payette Endowment Lands Alliance.)