



WASHOE COUNTY COMMISSION

1001 E. 9th Street
P.O. Box 11130
Reno, Nevada 89520
Phone (775) 328-2005
Fax (775) 328-2037

Report to the Legislative Committee on Public Lands

Senator Dean A. Rhoads, Chairman

Update of Public Lands and Natural Resource Issues in Washoe County

Testimony of
Jim Shaw, Chairman
Board of County Commissioners, Washoe County

Western Heritage Interpretive Center
Bartley Ranch Regional Park
Reno, Nevada

March 26, 2004

EXHIBIT <u>B</u> Lands	Document consists of <u>4</u> pages
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Meeting Date <u>03/26/04</u>	

Good morning. I would like to welcome you to Washoe County. We appreciate you being here and look forward to your report from these proceedings. In an effort to be brief, I will limit this testimony to address the more significant land-based issues in Washoe County. Later in your agenda today, Steve Bradhurst of our Department of Water Resources will speak to the water-related issues of Washoe County.

There are three strategies that strike me as the keys to Washoe County's success in the area of natural resources and public lands issues. The first is the **partnerships** we have forged with the development community; with federal, state, and local government agencies; and with non-profit organizations. Secondly, our successes have been linked to actively seeking to **leverage funding** from multiple sources for both the acquisition and long-term operation and management of public lands. Finally, I believe we have sought to provide **economic benefits** to our community through the management and preservation of our natural resources and public lands.

The success of our efforts built on these three strategies is fueled in large part by the strong public support in Washoe County for resource management. This has been demonstrated through overwhelming voter approvals of bond issues for land acquisition, construction of trails and trailheads, and protection of sensitive lands and cultural resources.

We are working to maintain our momentum from our successes in these areas and direct that energy toward the challenges we continue to pursue, including access to federal lands; protection of the watershed and key wildlife habitat areas; and funding for important resource management projects such as forest fuel reduction, weed abatement, and revegetation of existing disturbed areas.

The issue of access to public lands and the protection of significant resources almost always overlap in Washoe County. This dynamic stems from the fact that the majority of U.S. Forest Service (USFS) lands along the entire eastern Sierra Front have been acquired via land exchanges or purchases during the last 30 years. We applaud the foresight and work by the USFS to protect the sensitive lands and watershed of the Sierras as well as provide recreational opportunities, but the work is not complete. There are a limited number of select parcels that we need to acquire to complete the community goals of providing protection as well as providing recreational access. The use of funding from state and local bonds, as well as the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, is key to these acquisitions.

Washoe County is always seeking **alternative methods for acquisition**. One example demonstrates our support of the Bureau of Land Management's (BLM's) goal to consolidate specific areas, such as the Pah Rah and Virginia ranges, within their historic checkerboard pattern of land holdings. In this instance, Washoe County worked with the BLM and a local developer to encourage a land exchange that preserved cultural resources and provided access to the Pah Rah Range, and in return provided the developer with land more suitable for development.

In addition, Washoe County has worked in conjunction with both the USFS and BLM to update their Resource Management Plans to identify key areas not only for acquisition but also areas that are appropriate for disposal into private ownership. In a related effort, county staff is currently working to develop a **federal Washoe County Lands Bill** that would provide for the sale of these identified federal lands to reduce public ownership of properties better suited to private uses.

Two large land acquisitions occurred in Washoe County this year. First, the Arrowcreek Development donated 1,500 acres to the county's Open Space Program. This land protects the Thomas Creek stream corridor and provides trail access benefits to the Arrowcreek housing development. Second, the USFS and BLM have acquired 900 acres of the Casey Ranch in Washoe Valley, surrounding both Davis Creek and Bower's Mansion Regional Parks. These lands are also adjacent to the Scripts Wildlife Management Area and Washoe Lake State Park. These kinds of acquisitions preserve cultural resources, wetlands, wildlife habitat and a good portion of the agricultural heritage of one of the most beautiful valleys in our region. Washoe County is committed to working with all federal and state partners in the long-term operations and management of these lands.

Washoe County has taken the lead in the **first USFS partnership** whereby a local bond issue was passed to pay for the construction of the Whites Creek and Thomas Creek Trailheads and Trail system. The county agreed to provide the daily maintenance and operation of these facilities, while the USFS will provide the major infrastructure preservation costs.

In the **Tahoe Basin**, we are working with Carson and Douglas counties on the extension of the Lake Tahoe Bike Path System around the lake. Washoe County is also working with federal, state and local agencies on the possible acquisition of the Ponderosa Ranch in Incline Village. This could be a very rare opportunity to reduce vehicle traffic around the Lake by utilizing the property's existing 9-acre parking area to provide a transportation hub for the northeastern portion of the Tahoe basin. In addition, the Ponderosa property could provide trail access from the parking lot to the Tahoe Rim Trail, to the Lake shore path system and a base for shuttle service to beaches on the east shore.

Washoe County is working with the Army Corps of Engineers to establish a **Wetland In-Lieu Fee Program** to help facilitate the development community's ability to meet federal requirements to mitigate wetlands. Under the program, the county would provide the site for the restoration and operate the fee payment program. This is an extensive cost analysis program which establishes the fee the developer will pay to have wetlands enhanced or restored on county lands, as mitigation for the wetlands they have impacted. (It is important to note that the Army Corps of Engineers is the agency that decides whether or not the developer may mitigate in this manner, not the county.) We are designing this program after models that have been established in Clark County and in other states.

Washoe County has been working with the Nevada Division of Forestry (NDF) and USFS on **fire prevention** in the Washoe Valley and Galena areas. In particular, the Forest Service was able to begin reducing the fuel loads in the canyon as part of the joint Whites Creek Trailhead project. At both Davis Creek and Galena Creek Regional Parks we are in the second year of fuels reduction. Washoe County is also working with NDF on utilizing seasonal fire fighters -- when the fire fighters are free from their primary duty of fighting fires in the summer -- for fuels reduction and tree health issues on open space lands. (These particular seasonal NDF positions are paid for by Washoe County.) County staff is also working to develop the Sierra Base Trail system so that it may be used as a fire access road, a fire break and a recreational trail.

Washoe County and the City of Reno have worked as "Cooperating Agencies" with the USFS to address **public access and recreational use on Peavine Mountain**. This collaboration produced the *Peavine Mountain Roads and Recreation Strategy*. This document was developed by working with numerous interested citizens and recreational groups to determine appropriate and adequate access points, trailhead locations, travel routes, road closure areas and future restoration sites.

These are just a few examples of the many partnerships that Washoe County has developed to provide creative solutions for multiple stakeholders sharing an interest in the public lands of our region. Thank you for the generous time in which you have allowed us to provide this report.