

Eagle begins effort to acquire 2,000 acres in Foothills

City's goal is to protect the land for hiking and biking, to save the view for the future and to prevent potential development

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The Idaho Statesman | Edition Date: 06-07-2006

It's a big proposition for a small city that doesn't yet have a parks and recreation department.

But the city of Eagle has begun trying to acquire and protect for public recreation roughly 2,000 acres of BLM land in the Foothills north of the city.

That's a big swath of land to oversee — it's more than three times the size of the sprawling 546-acre Eagle Island State Park. It would be larger than two-thirds of Idaho's state parks, most of which are well under 1,000 acres.

"As long as it remains in the public's hands, that's what's important," said Rachel Winer of the Idaho Conservation League. She reserved judgment about whether Eagle has the resources to manage the land, trails and a proposed equestrian center until more details are known.

The city submitted a preliminary application to the BLM in late March that proposes the land be used for biking, equestrian, hiking and other non-motorized recreation.

City officials also want to preserve the BLM land that would sit adjacent to a proposed planned community. If annexed, the development would double the size of Eagle.

John Petrovsky, a spokesman for the North Ada County Foothills Association, wants the land to be kept as close to its natural state as possible.

"Our basic idea is to protect the native habitat," said Petrovsky, who endorses Eagle's general concept.

Both Winer and Petrovsky said they like the idea of prohibiting motorized recreational uses — which BLM allows — even if some local residents enjoy riding motorcycles or four-wheelers in the hills.

"People want a place to go that's quiet, especially as we face more and more growth in the Valley," Winer said. "That's a big reason people move here."

The city proposes building a parking lot, trailhead and equestrian facility for events.

Eagle city staff are now working on four plans to complete their application to acquire the BLM land — a development plan, financial plan, timetable for development and operational plan.

"It's quite a lot of up-front work to do, to perfect that application by doing all the background, layout and planning," said John Sullivan, assistant field manager for the BLM's Four Rivers Field Office.

The city is seeking the land under the federal Recreation and Public Purposes Act, which authorizes the sale or lease of public lands for recreational or public purposes to state and local governments and some nonprofit organizations.

BLM officials said one local example of the use of this law is a remote-controlled airplane park on 40 acres south of Kuna-Mora Road.

Other uses are less recreational in nature, such as land for a fire station in Mountain Home and school sites.

The impetus for Eagle's land acquisition is two-fold, according to Eagle Mayor Nancy Merrill.

First, the city wants to protect wide open rangeland that equestrians, hikers and others have enjoyed for generations. The other issue was city officials' concern that developer M3 — which is currently preparing an application for a planned community adjacent to the BLM land — would seek a land swap with BLM and build houses along the ridge top.

Merrill wants the city to own and manage the land in the Foothills to prevent residential development, which could change the view for Eagle residents.

"It will be a visual buffer, so the Foothills will look exactly as you see them now," Merrill said. "You can see the mountains and the Foothills from almost anyplace in Eagle — that's one of the things that makes Eagle so beautiful."

The public will get a chance to comment at several points during this land acquisition process, BLM officials said.

They will first review Eagle's four detailed plans before deciding whether it will move forward.