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## **New bill a start**

After five years of negotiations and speculation, a new Washington County land bill has been pitched in the U.S. Senate.

Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, introduced the legislation last week, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, is expected to introduce it in the House in the coming weeks. At its core, the goal behind the land bill is to set aside wilderness areas to protect the natural landscape while also allowing land in less-sensitive areas to be developed.

Regardless of what the bill looks like after lawmakers finish their debates, it's easy to see that many Southern Utahns will prefer for more land to be set aside for development. Others will argue that the bill doesn't go far enough to preserve the views and endangered species.

The fact that neither side in this ongoing debate is entirely happy is probably a good sign that a decent compromise has been forged.

Under the plan introduced by Bennett, 264,394 acres of land would move into the National Wilderness Preservation System. About 165.5 miles of the Virgin River in and adjacent to Zion National Park would be designated under the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. Two national recreation areas would be created, and Beaver Dam Wash area would be set aside as a long-term protection to the desert tortoise.

On the other side of the debate, about 140,000 acres would be opened up for recreation opportunities, and non-environmentally sensitive lands would be opened up for private ownership, accounting for three-tenths of 1 percent of the land in Washington County.

Clearly, more details have to be worked out. The bill must be vetted to ensure that no one person or entity benefits more than others. But the bill is a significant start toward a plan that will allow for more harmonious growth in Washington County.

The first bill, introduced a few years ago, had its flaws, but it got the discussion going on an important issue. The Vision Dixie process followed and allowed the public to chime in on its desires for the future growth pattern in Southern Utah.

The public didn't say growth should stop. Instead, residents provided some guidance on how the growth should be allowed to occur. Those components are included in the new land bill.

Our views and endangered species should be protected. Land that isn't environmentally sensitive should be turned over so that it can be owned privately and so that it contributes to the local tax base.

But both sides of this longtime debate have to give a little to get a little. The land bill appears to do just that. The key now is for lawmakers to dive into the wording of the bill to make sure that it's equitable for Southern Utah.

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