

Better land bill

April 30, 2008

EDITORIAL

The new version of the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2008, as rewritten by Sen. Bob Bennett, R-Utah, and Rep. Jim Matheson, D-Utah, is a compromise effort on a previous bill that raised a lot of questions and some strong opposition in Washington County.

There were problems with the original bill that many believed favored developers.

Instead of forcing it through, Bennett and Matheson went to the people who would be most affected by the bill and talked to them about their concerns, then reconfigured the bill.

Now, however, the Southern Utah Wilderness Alliance, the Sierra Club and Wasatch Mountain Club — three environmentalist groups — have issued a joint statement saying that they cannot support the bill as it is currently written.

That's all fine and well.

But, the discussion must remain between Bennett, Matheson and the people of Washington County.

Historically, the West has had to deal with political meddlers from the East and West coasts who wield a lot of power but have no feel for our region or day-to-day needs.

We've seen relentless attacks on our ecology by supposed environmentalist groups that have thwarted efforts to save our forests - the bark beetle infestation on Cedar Mountain, as just one example.

So while we thank SUWA, the Sierra Club and Wasatch Mountain Club for their interest, we also ask them to kindly butt out of our business at this point, at least when it comes to this bill.

The people of Washington County have clearly indicated their preferences for how they want the region to look 50 years from now through the Vision Dixie process. That includes better use of existing developed space and an emphasis on more green space so as not to spoil the spectacular views and wildlands that surround us, while accommodating our growth.

At this point, we don't need anybody coming in and interfering with our process.

Is the new bill perfect? No. But when opposing sides acknowledge that the bill serves their interests, we have to think that Bennett and Matheson are on the right track.

Washington County growth is what it is, a very real fact of life carrying with it a unique set of circumstances that are potentially problematic - from infrastructure to density issues. Couple that with the fact that so much of the land surrounding us is owned by the federal government and you have a situation that multiplies in complexity.

That's why we believe the work going on now between the feds and Washington County residents is the right way to go in knocking out the final version of this bill.