

County will explore ways to preserve cedars

By Megan Doyle, Daily News staff writer
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Brett Bennett doesn't want to see the old-growth cedars on Moscow Mountain made into lumber, but he's hesitant about declaring an area on the mountain next to Bennett Lumber Company timberland a state park.

Bennett, the owner of the company, said he's concerned there will be more traffic on the mountain, tearing up roads his company paid for. He also sees the likelihood of more people wandering through the company's property. And he doesn't want to give people access to his property to cut down Christmas trees.

"We'd have more than what we'd know what to do with as far as problems on the mountain," he said.

He knows the older trees would not be profitable to try to cut and sell as lumber. He said if he or anyone else tried, they'd "probably be shot."

The discussion arose from the idea to make the area a state park. People representing the Moscow Mountain State Park Campaign, with Moscow Mountain resident Mark Solomon acting as spokesman, presented their idea to the Latah County commissioners Wednesday in hopes of gaining sponsorship from the county to forward the concept to the state.

Solomon asked county commissioners to help sponsor legislation that will create a state park on Moscow Mountain, preserve the trees and establish a citizen advisory group. He does not anticipate establishing more picnic facilities or RV facilities.

Solomon's proposal comes on the heels of Gov. Dirk Kempthorne's Experience Idaho initiative announcement. Experience Idaho calls for money for improvements of existing state parks for better and increased usage. Solomon believes the timing, with Kempthorne's mind on improving state parks, is perfect to bring up the addition of a state park.

If doesn't work out, there are other ways of preserving the trees.

"It's helpful to know what card you can't play anymore," Solomon said.

To ensure the trees won't be left unprotected, the campaign for Moscow Mountain State Park will continue while other options are researched.

Everyone at Wednesday's meeting with the county commissioners agreed the old-growth cedars, on about 60 acres of the 295-acre property, need to be saved and should not be cut down, but there were several ideas on how to protect the trees.

The 295 acres of state endowment lands are being maintained and leased by the Nature Conservancy. The 10-year lease agreement will expire Dec. 31 and the Nature Conservancy has decided not to pursue renewal. Solomon is fearful that because of state laws and regulations, the approximately 800-year-old cedars will be cut down by the state if no one

else takes over ownership of the land. He and others see the Moscow Mountain State Park as a permanent solution.

"For all types of reasons it needs to move out of that school trust situation," Solomon said.

The land was appraised in the early 1990s at about \$650,000. If the property were to be put up for sale, it would go to the highest bidder, no matter what the buyer intended to use the property for.

"I think there are some options here to pursue," said Commissioner Paul Kimmell. As long as the Idaho Department of Lands receives money for the property, they should not care who or how the lands are managed, he added.

It is possible Bennett Lumber could be involved in a land exchange to acquire the 295 acres.

That was how Bennett acquired about 300 acres adjacent to the proposed state park property.

"They're doable, but they can be a complicated animal," Bennett said.

There are a few others that may be willing to take over management of the lands.

Though the Palouse Land Trust, which owns and manages property at Idler's Rest Nature Preserve, would not mind managing the property, it will abstain from being a sponsor for legislation, said Gerry Wright, president of the board of directors for Palouse Land Trust.

It's also possible community members could join together to work out management of the property, Solomon said.

So far, the state park option is the most viable if all interested parties could agree on the management of the property.

"I'm not against it as long as my concerns are met," Bennett said.

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