

OPINION

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"A VERY SCOTUS ROMANCE"



Embrace the chance to weigh in on planned highway through Red Cliffs

"It's a bypass. You've got to build bypasses."
"The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy," by Douglas Adams, 1979

The question of whether we have got to build a bypass through the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area of southwest Utah is once again before the people of the United States and, specifically, of Washington County, Utah.

The public has until June 24 to comment on the latest of several federal Environmental Impact Statements, and Supplemental Environmental Impact Statements, which will, eventually, perhaps, determine whether the highly controversial North Corridor Highway will be built.

The outcome matters to people in St. George, obviously. Some of them, including local elected officials, want the highway badly. They resent what they see as "deep state" efforts to block it.

Others oppose the highway. They worry that the very wild lands that drew them to the beautiful Red Rocks area, and to homes they built on the assumption that they were next to permanently protected wild lands, will be seriously damaged.

That the threat of wildfires, previously rare in the barren Mojave Desert, will greatly increase as highway construction and other human activity encourages invasive vegetation.

That the highway plan renege on a 1996 deal accepted at the time by local officials to protect 61,000 acres of public lands for the Mojave desert tortoise and other endangered and threatened species in exchange for opening up some 300,000 acres of tortoise habitat on private and public land outside the reserve for development.



LENI PERRY / The Spectrum / The Associated Press
A view of the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve from a planned extension of Washington Parkway in southern Utah.

The point is not just how many large tortoises are lumbering around Washington County. The point is that the well-being of native animals and plants is an indicator of the overall ecological health of an area. If the natural world suffers, humans will, too, from wildfires, declining air quality and other symptoms of a sick environment.

The issue should be important even to people who live nowhere near St. George. It's a question of whether any federally protected land, some of it purchased with federal funds earmarked for reservation property for conservation and recreational uses, will ever be truly preserved.

Whether local officials and development interests can successfully pressure federal agencies to agree to allow projects that effectively countermand acts of Congress. The plan for building the

4.5-mile stretch of highway has been bashing its head against bureaucratic walls for more than 15 years. The idea is to make it easier to drive through rapidly growing areas in and around St. George, specifically from Red Cliffs Parkway on the west to Washington Parkway, and thus to I-15, on the east.

Successive administrations, Republican and Democratic, rejected the plans as threatening too much damage to a congressionally designated conservation area and threatening to further shrink the habitat of various endangered species.

But highway advocates kept at it. They won approval for the highway right of way in the waning days of the Trump administration. Which, of course, triggered a wave of lawsuits from local and national environmental groups who argued that the approval violated a shroud of federal laws and regulations.

The lawsuits were set aside by a federal court, sending the Bureau of Land Management and Fish and Wildlife Service back to the drawing board.

The resulting Draft Supplemental Environmental Impact Statement was released earlier this month. It noted the increased fire danger and other threats posed by the envisioned highway, not only to tortoises but also to existing human habitation, and identified a handful of alternative routes to improve east-west traffic flow.

The draft immediately drew harsh criticism from all four members of the Utah delegation to the House of Representatives, who accused the Biden administration of ignoring the voices of the people most affected.

(This from representatives, who held a "public hearing" in Washington County in April which heard only from highway advocates and silenced anyone, even local residents, who wanted to argue the other side of the issue.)

The argument that blocking the highway is solely the act of far-away federal bureaucrats or "fringe" environmental groups is simply not true.

There are many real people in Washington County who also oppose the project, as well as environmental advocates from elsewhere in the nation who fear the precedent that might be set if any National Conservation Area loses its special status.

As there are locals who favor it, who see a chance to ease traffic congestion and open up more acres for development.

Either way, the newest plan once again invites the public to weigh in. It's easy. Just do a Google search for "Red Cliffs National Conservation Area" and have your say.

OUR VIEW

By the Tribune Editorial Board

Sustainability efforts have neglected Indigenous wisdom for far too long

Over the last six months I have been asked to participate in conferences about sustainability. I have given lectures, talks and panel discussions about the future of the world we live in.

As a Native American tribal elder, storyteller and activist, my perspective is deeply rooted in the teachings of my people who lived sustainably with the land for generations. Our relationship with the environment is sacred.

What I have come to realize is that this capitalist system is not sustainable. I could even make the argument that the system itself,



DARREN PARRY

and those who participate in it, realize that it is not sustainable and that is why we are creating

sustainability offices within our companies, schools and government to minimize the effects of our decisions when it comes to stewarding our environment.

Our current capitalist model says that we can take that land over there, and extract, deplete, develop and even destroy it, for the sake of short-term profits. Maybe we need to start asking ourselves: Should we? And if we do, at what cost is it going to come to future generations?

Maybe it is time we should start putting a price on the things that we do not put a cost on today. Let us put a dollar cost on what the development would do to our air

pollution. Let us put a dollar cost on how much more traffic is going to be added to our highways and railways. How much more water is going to be required to sustain that development for the next 50 years? Then, just maybe, if the price that the future generations are going to pay is too great a cost to our environment, maybe that development isn't such a good idea. It is time that we change our thinking and consider the health of not only the people, but also the health of the watersheds that nourish our lakes and rivers and our non-human kinfolk.

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