

The following article was posted on June 12th, 2013, in the New Times - Volume 27, Issue 46

## THE GRAND SCHEME OF THINGS

### *State Parks again mulls purchasing the La Grande Tract—but will the county stand for it?*

It's been more than five years since the state's proposal to buy 584 acres of county-owned dunes land for recreational vehicle use crossed county planners' desks, and though that sale has long sat idle thanks to opposition from the environmental community, it seems there's a quiet effort to lobby the Board of Supervisors to once again take up the idea.

But there's a little problem. According to a Coastal Commission-approved document guiding land use in the dunes, the La Grande Tract is designated as a "buffer zone" between a state nature preserve and the state off-highway vehicle park to the south.

That hasn't stopped local officials—mostly those representing areas most likely to benefit from an official recreational vehicle area expansion, and those critical of the Air Pollution Control District's crackdown on fugitive dust from the park—from beginning unofficial talks with state parks about putting the sale up for reconsideration, and whether the state could make an allocation for sale in the next state budget.

At a March 23 meeting of the California Department of Parks and Recreation's Off-Highway Motor Vehicle Recreation Commission in Redding, the topic returned to once again pursuing the tract. Commissioner Diana Pérez—supposedly ignited by the fact the state's current appropriation for the sale expired this month—reported that in the first few months of 2013 she was in close contact with a number of local officials, including county supervisors Paul Teixeira, Debbie Arnold, and Bruce Gibson, as well as Atascadero City Councilwoman Roberta Fonzi and Grover Beach Mayor Debbie Peterson. Her trips also included lunch with at least one resident of the Nipomo Mesa and two "in-depth" tours of the Oceano Dunes.

Following those meetings, Pérez reported that she perceived strong local support—from what she called a "silent majority," according to minutes from the meeting—for State Parks when it comes to the current state recreational vehicle area (SRVA). She further implied that support includes expanding the SRVA, and added that she'd like to see the opportunity to buy the tract.

The idea seemed to have general support from the commission, and State Parks Chief Deputy Director Aaron Robertson said they were currently working with the Department of Finance regarding re-appropriation of funding for the purchase.

Less than a month after Pérez reinvigorated the discussion, on April 15, the Grover Beach City Council unanimously voted (Councilman Bill Nicolls was absent) at the request of Mayor Peterson to send a letter to the County Board of Supervisors in support of reconsidering the sale of the tract to the state.

The council discussed what they called the potential benefits from such a sale, including those to the local economy, local recreational opportunities and tourism value, as well as easier management of the land under single management and reduced liability for county residents.

The state's last offer for the land came in at roughly \$4.8 million.

Despite the tract's designation, the Department of Parks and Recreation has permitted off-highway vehicle use in the La Grande Tract since it first entered into a lease and operating agreement with the county in 1982, and hasn't yet revised its General Development Plan in accordance with the county's Local Coastal Plan to reflect the tract's designation as a buffer zone.

The road to realizing that designation has been bumpy, to say the least. In 2007, *New Times* reported that the county planning commission's December 2006 determination that the sale would be consistent with the county general plan was based on a staff report that suspiciously omitted pertinent information (including the pictured Figure 4). An appeal was filed on the decision, and the Board of Supervisors subsequently upheld the appeal in April 2007, determining the sale didn't conform with the General Plan. This led to a 2009 grand jury report calling the original omission "at best inept staff performance or at worst deliberate deception."

A number of court cases followed, with both sides haggling about enforcement of the Local Coastal Plan over the state's General Development Plan. Long story short, the issue is now beyond legal challenge, as the court ultimately concluded it couldn't require the state to conform to the Local Coastal Plan by a certain date.

While the reasons to oppose the sale may seem wonky and superfluous to some residents—and certainly to OHV enthusiasts—the Oceano Dunes have long been recognized by conservationists and government agencies as one of the most extensive natural dunes lands remaining in California. And environmentalist groups contend that continued forfeiture of the county's coastal dunes for recreational vehicle use is causing harm to coastal dune habitat in conflict with the county's Local Coastal Plan.

Andrew Christie, director of the Santa Lucia chapter of the Sierra Club, certainly sees it that way. On May 23, he wrote a letter of his own to the Board of Supervisors, pointing out that the county's South County Coastal Planning Area Standards, which contain portions of the county's Local Coastal Plan, dictate that the state's SVRA general development plan is to—once and for all—be revised in accordance with the Local Coastal Plan.

Furthermore, Christie wrote, the Figure 4 map of the Local Coastal Plan clearly designates the La Grande Tract as a buffer zone, a natural area required for habitat protection.

A number of sources in city government and community services districts from municipalities surrounding the dunes told *New Times* they were aware the issue was generating discussion, but that no items had been officially agendized to either support or reject the possible sale as of press time. That includes the Board of Supervisors. Some sources said, however, that those items will likely begin appearing on agendas in the coming months.

*Contact News Editor Matt Fountain at [mfountain@newtimeslo.com](mailto:mfountain@newtimeslo.com).*