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District IV County Commission candidates both oppose restricting access to public lands

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(Editor's Note: The Citizens for Public Access, the public advocacy group formed this year in Lyon and Mineral Counties to successfully battle suggested lands bill and wilderness proposals, asked candidates to respond to a questionnaire. In previous weeks, responses from the Congressional and Assembly candidates were covered. This week, candidates for the Lyon County Board of Commissioners, District IV are featured.)

While only one candidate for the District IV seat on the Board of Lyon County Commissioners would like to see some federal land transferred to the county, the other says he would be opposed to selling federal lands to the private sector and would accept such transfers only if they would benefit county use, schools or public facilities.

And, the two Republican candidates both say they do not support the idea that a lands bill must contain a wilderness component.

Responses to a questionnaire from the Citizens for Public Access also indicate Joe Mortensen and Sherry Parsons of Fernley did agree on several of the issues to various degrees.

Parsons said, "I do want some lands transferred from the Federal government to the cities and counties" for growth purposes. "Using Federal lands is an economic way for our counties and cities to grow."

But, Mortensen responded, "The only public land I would accept transfer on would be for county use, schools, public facilities, etc. I am definitely against selling to the private sector.

"You don't have to have a lands bill to transfer public lands to the counties, it just takes longer," Mortensen added; and he offered a succinct "No" response to the question about the need for a lands bill to contain a wilderness component.

Parsons agreed on the latter, saying, "I do not support the idea that land bills must contain a wilderness area component. Federal land needs to be used in a way that the citizens of the state support."

She also labeled attempts by wilderness organizations to acquire designations "land grabs" and said she opposes closure of multi-use lands. Mortensen said he does not think lands bills are a "win-win" situation "because it greatly restricts the use of the property"; and he added he would "oppose restricting access" to multi-use lands.

QUESTION 1: Given the fact that all lands bills (both enacted and withdrawn) have contained a transfer of public lands to the counties, can you visualize alternative means through which counties might achieve the same objectives? Are there public lands in Lyon County that you would like to see transferred from the Federal government to the county or put up for sale to the public? How important is it for Lyon County to obtain Federal lands? Please discuss your answer.

Mortensen: You don't have to have a lands bill to transfer public lands to the counties, it just takes longer. The only public land I would accept transfer on would be for county use, schools, public facilities, etc. I am definitely against selling to the private sector. This is not that important because the amount is not that great.

Parsons: By creating bills written were there is no transfer of land, with other agreements between two parties. I do want some public lands transferred from the Federal government to the cities and counties. I feel it is very important to have a transfer of lands from the Federal government to the counties and cities as they grow. As the counties and cities grow, they need more land for schools, parks, hospitals, other public used. Using Federal lands is an economic way for our counties and cities to grow.

QUESTION 2: The Nevada Congressional delegation has often described lands bills as a "win-win" situation for all concerned, yet the majority of rural Nevadans appear to dispute this. What is your view? Please explain.

Mortensen: I do not think it is a win-win situation because it greatly restricts the use of the property.

Parsons: Land bills have been used as opportunity for certain wilderness organizations to make land grabs. Wilderness organizations have become very efficient in seeing that there are wilderness areas in each bill. With the aging of America, I see wilderness areas being used by a select few, the elderly and disabled being completely left out.

QUESTION 3: If the U.S. Forest Service (USFS) or the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) moved to close or restrict access to multi-use public lands in Lyon County that are under their administrative jurisdiction, would you as a commissioner oppose such an action? If you oppose the closure, to what degree would you be willing to use county resources to resist the agency?

Mortensen: I would oppose restricting access. I would have to look into what is legal as far as using county resources.

Parsons: I would oppose any action by the U.S. Forest Service or the Bureau of Land Management to close or restrict access to multi-use public lands in Lyon County. I would do all that I could to help resist any action to close or restrict access to multi-use public lands in Lyon County.

QUESTION 4: Would you be willing to support a proposal to designate as wilderness an area in south Lyon County of approximately 50,000 acres in exchange for a land transfer from the Federal government to the county in central or north Lyon County? Please explain.

Mortensen: No, as I stated earlier, you do not need a lands bill to transfer small amounts of Federal property to the county. The City of Fernley has been in the process of transferring BLM ground to the city for schools, parks, and municipal purposes.

Parsons: I would not support any proposal that would designate as a wilderness area in south Lyon County of approximately 50,000 acres in exchange for a land transfer from the Federal government to the county in central or north Lyon County. I feel there needs to be resistance and not compromise to include a wilderness package in every land agreement with the federal government.

QUESTION 5: Given the actions taken in 2008 by Lyon, Mineral and Esmeralda counties with regard to lands bills, would you encourage meetings between wilderness/restricted access organizations and open access advocacy groups in order to reach accord on future wilderness goals? Would you be willing to facilitate these meetings through your personal participation?

Mortensen: As much as we don't like what they are trying to do, we must attend these meetings to keep track of what they are doing and minimize the damage they are trying to inflict upon us.

Parsons: I feel meeting with the wilderness groups would again lead to compromise. I would be willing to facilitate at meetings, again I hope the meetings do not occur. I do not feel the best use of time and

resources are meetings with wilderness groups.

QUESTION 6: Do you support incorporating multi-use public lands into wilderness even when these lands have been determined by the appropriate Federal agency to not meet the established criteria for wilderness contained in the 1964 Wilderness Act? Should the criteria for designating areas as wilderness be relaxed? Please discuss.

Mortensen: No. They should not relax the criteria. They set up the guidelines and they should follow them. There should be a limit to the amount of wilderness. We have a large amount of designated wilderness in the Sierras.

Parsons: I do not support incorporating multi-use public lands to wilderness when these lands have been determined by the Federal agencies to not meet the established criteria for wilderness contained in the 1964 Wilderness Act. The criteria for wilderness areas should not be relaxed. The citizens of states with large Federal land holdings already feel they are not being heard and there are too many areas being turned into wilderness areas.

QUESTION 7: How do you see the destination of wilderness areas in Nevada affecting economic development? Do you view increasing the size of wilderness areas in the state as increasing Nevada's economic health? With regard to solar, geothermal, and wind energy projects, will increasing the amount of wilderness have any effect on their development?

Mortensen: It won't affect economic development. It will harm existing economic use of the ground. No. Wilderness would restrict solar, geothermal and wind energy projects. Lincoln County is fighting a wind farm in their wildlife habitat.

Parsons: I can see negative effects on the economy in communities and adjacent communities throughout the state with the designation of wilderness areas. Increasing the size of wilderness areas will not increase Nevada's economic health. In naming areas wilderness, we will be restricting the development of solar, geothermal and wind energy projects.

QUESTION 8: Do you support the idea that a lands bill must contain a wilderness component? Please discuss.

Mortensen: No. I've explained above.

Parsons: I do not support the idea that lands bills must contain a wilderness area component.. Federal land needs to be used in a way that the citizens of the state support. We need to pass a resolution in Nevada to support the citizens of Nevada and their rights in land use.
