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Lincoln land bill draws criticism

Lobbyist-developer Whittemore calls claims 'silly'

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A federal land bill designed to open up water rights in Lincoln County to Clark County and designate several areas as wilderness land also includes a provision some critics say unfairly benefits politically connected developer Harvey Whittemore.

The provision moves a utility corridor off Whittemore's Coyote Springs development, where the influential casino lobbyist plans to build a master-planned community with golf courses.

The bill is sponsored by all five Nevada members of Congress, who said the provision simply aligns the 11-mile utility corridor with a water utility corridor just west of U.S. 93. The relocation eases the development of private land, the congress members said, but that development will bring much needed tax revenue to Lincoln County.

"The senator's purpose is to allow the development of a private community out there," Jack Finn, Republican Sen. John Ensign's press secretary, said.

Rep. Shelley Berkley agreed, adding that it was her hope that the bill would also help bring water into Southern Nevada.

Finn and spokesmen for other members of the Nevada delegation said the bill required Whittemore to pay the fair market value for the right-of-way of the land and any costs associated with the relocation. Whittemore already owns the land, as well as the rights to the utility corridor on the west side of U.S. 93.

Whittemore said there was no point in having utility corridors on both sides of the highway.

Whittemore says he may have to pay \$300,000 or more to the BLM for the processing of this change.

Whittemore said allegations that the bill in Congress would give an undue benefit to his proposed resort development in Coyote Springs in Clark and Lincoln counties are "absolutely silly."

"The notion the federal government is giving anything away is absurd," he said. "There is no need to retain a cooridor for utilities if there is one on the other side of the road," he said.

He said he is proposing to give up 10,000 of his 43,000 acres for a habitat for the desert tortoise and other species that "people feel is important."

Whittemore said he hopes to begin construction on the first phase of the development in the next six to 12 months. It would have up to 125,000 homes and a number of golf courses.

Janine Blaeloch, director of the Seattle-based Western Land Exchange Project, said the provision in the bill amounted to a gift from Nevada's congressional delegation to a politically well-connected lobbyist and developer.

"It's one of many gifts that Harvey has gotten," she said. "We're trying to deal with all the gifts he's been handed for public property."

Blaeloch said Whittemore may own the land where the utility corridor is being removed, but the land was essentially valueless for development as long as the right-of-way remained. Whittemore should have to pay the increased value of the land that would be used for the Coyote Springs master-planned community, a total that could be millions, she said.

Whittemore said the scrutiny and criticism are unfair.

"This would be a story if we were asking to move existing power lines. There is nothing on my property," he said. "People are suggesting that because we're all Nevadans, there is something improper. It's ridiculous."

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