

## **Statement of Senator Harry Reid on Introduction of the *Carson City Vital Community Act of 2008* July 31, 2008**

MR. REID. Mr. President, today I rise with my good friend Senator Ensign to introduce the Carson City Vital Community Act of 2008.

The origins of this legislation can be found in Carson City's collaborative master planning effort, "Envision Carson City." In 2004, the elected officials in Carson City started a dialogue with their citizens to determine how the city should grow and change over the next 20 years. At the end of a 2-year public process, city leaders had a clear message from their residents. The community wants to keep growth compact, maintain the integrity of the Bureau of Land Management (BLM) and Forest Service lands surrounding the town, enhance open space opportunities and maintain easy access to public lands. The Carson City Vital Community Act of 2008 was developed in close partnership with Carson City and other key stakeholders to help fulfill these goals.

Before I describe this legislation and its importance, it might be helpful for me to explain that Carson City is both a city and a county. It wasn't always this way. For over a hundred years the town of Carson City was the county seat of Ormsby County. But in 1969 the county dissolved and the government functions were consolidated into what we now simply call Carson City.

Like all but one of our counties in Nevada, Carson City is mostly federal land. The town of Carson City is bounded on the west by Forest Service lands that stretch to the shores of Lake Tahoe and by BLM lands on the east. These open landscapes create a dramatic western backdrop for Nevada's state capital but also mean that the federal government is intimately involved in what would normally be local community decisions.

This legislation makes much needed adjustments to the pattern of federal land ownership in Carson City. We have strived to make changes that will improve the ability of the federal land management agencies to focus on their core goals. All too often, the BLM and the Forest Service are distracted from proper forest and range management by urban encroachment issues. We have a unique situation in Carson City where the community has offered to take on the responsibilities of managing the wildland-urban interface, while also offering to convey a major inholding to the Forest Service for incorporation into the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. This is a major step in the right direction and hopefully will serve as a model for other communities around the west.

Our legislation also provides lands to the Washoe Tribe, strengthening the Tribe's conservation and commercial efforts in Carson City. Additionally, nearly 20,000 acres of BLM lands surrounding Carson City will be permanently withdrawn from future develop to protect local viewsheds and public access. All of these actions will move Carson City one step closer to realizing the vision that it worked hard to develop through a public process that has now spanned over four years.

Title I of this legislation aims to create a sensible land ownership pattern in Carson City, aligned with the community's vision of keeping growth compact and maintaining the integrity of the surrounding public lands. It also addresses two serious concerns facing the community: wildfires in the foothills of the Sierras and flooding along the Carson River.

Under this title, roughly 2,200 acres of Carson City land will be transferred to the Forest Service. This prime, forested land is far removed from Carson City and is surrounded by state park lands and the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest. Incorporating this large inholding into the Humboldt-Toiyabe will allow for improved management for wildlife habitat, watershed protection, and other important uses. It will also ensure that the land remains undeveloped and open for public access.

This title also makes important adjustments to the pattern of city and federal lands on the west side of the town. Roughly 1,000 acres of Forest Service land bordering urban areas will be conveyed to Carson City as protected open space. This conveyance will let both Carson City and the Forest Service do what they do best. Carson City can more actively manage urban interface uses and the Forest Service can focus on their core responsibilities of resource protection and forest health.

Proper management of this buffer area between Carson City's neighborhoods and businesses and the broader public lands is an issue of great concern to the community. On July 14, 2004, thirty-one homes and three businesses were destroyed or damaged in the Waterfall Fire which spanned nearly 9,000 acres of public and private land. Through our legislation, the Forest Service land that currently borders neighborhoods will be conveyed to Carson City, allowing the city to take a more prominent role in managing fuel loads in this critical area.

There is a different threat on the east side of Carson Valley. The Carson River has a long history of dramatic flooding. Over the last 150 years the river has flooded over 30 times, with half of those floods causing extensive damage. Two 100-year flood events have struck just in the last decade, one of which caused over \$5 million in damage. In a show of real vision and leadership, Carson City has started an aggressive campaign to acquire land along the Carson River, recognizing the value of protecting the natural function of the local floodplains.

Our legislation will enhance Carson City's efforts to acquire lands in the river corridor by conveying the 3,500-acre Silver Saddle Ranch and Prison Hill area from BLM to the city. Transferring these properties to Carson City will help create a large regional park along the Carson River, support the community's flood control efforts and address the community's call for open space. The city has been a key partner in the management of the Silver Saddle Ranch for over a decade. Along with the Friends of Silver Saddle, Carson City has taken the lead on the day-to-day management of the property, including providing law enforcement patrols and caring for facilities.

It is important to note that when this land is conveyed to the city it will come with conditions. The federal government will hold a conservation easement on these parcels to ensure that the scenic and natural qualities of the Silver Saddle Ranch and

Prison Hill are protected in perpetuity. The details of the conservation easement, which will focus on protecting the river corridor and the important wildlife habitat associated with the property, will be worked out by BLM, Carson City and key stakeholders like Friends of Silver Saddle and The Nature Conservancy.

In addition to supporting Carson City's forward-looking plans for the Carson River and its floodplain, conveying the Silver Saddle and Prison Hill area to Carson City also makes sense from a resource management perspective. BLM's Carson City District Office manages over 5 million acres of public land in western Nevada and eastern California. Their strength is managing Nevada's wide open spaces – not urban interface. Carson City, on the other hand, has far more resources to bring to bear in managing the Silver Saddle Ranch and Prison Hill area. Carson City has over 20 employees working on parks and open space, including two park rangers. They also have contracts in place with some of Nevada's most respected natural resource experts. The BLM will also keep a light hand in the management of this property by virtue of the conservation easement.

There is one unique provision related to the Silver Saddle Ranch and Prison Hill conveyance that deserves special mention. A small section of this land was once owned by Carson City. This 62-acre property, known as the Bernhard parcel, was slated to be subdivided into 35 home sites in 2001. The BLM and Carson City both recognized that the acquisition of this land was a priority for the protection of the Carson River corridor. Carson City responded quickly and acquired the parcel for open space before it could be developed. Their purchase price in 2001 was roughly \$1 million. Later, in 2006, the BLM purchased the Bernhard parcel from Carson City for fair market value, which by that time had reached \$2.5 million.

Under this legislation, we transfer the Bernhard parcel back to Carson City as part of the Silver Saddle Ranch and Carson River Area. We feel it is important that Carson City pay back 25 percent of the \$1.5 million profit they made on their transaction with the BLM. Why just 25 percent? The 25 percent reflects the remaining value of the land that is being conveyed back to Carson City after the conservation easement is taken into account. In western Nevada, conservation easements restricting development typically reduce property values by anywhere from 75 percent to 90 percent. We have required Carson City to come up with 25 percent, the most generous estimate of remaining value for the Bernhard parcel. When received, these funds will be placed into an endowment account for the BLM to use for the monitoring and enforcement of the conservation easement on the Silver Saddle Ranch and Prison Hill Area.

Our legislation also conveys roughly 1,700 acres of BLM land to Carson City for recreation and public purposes and open space. These are scattered parcels of BLM land in and around Carson City that would be used for primarily for parks, but also for flood control structures, municipal infrastructure like water tanks, and to give residents room to roam. Carson City already controls roughly a third of these acres through Recreation and Public Purpose Act leases. This bill would quickly and efficiently transfer these lands to the city.

Another provision of Title I deals with 53 acres of land that Carson City acquired from BLM years ago, under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act. The city now believes the land is better suited for commercial development. Although Carson City already owns these lands, by statute, if the city uses the land for something other than public purposes, the land reverts back to the BLM. Our legislation would remove the reversionary interest on these 50 acres so that Carson City can sell the land at an appropriate time. If the City decides to sell the land, we require that it be auctioned, with proceeds returning to the Carson City special account which provides funding for federal acquisition of sensitive lands and protection of noted cultural resources.

One of the parcels where the federal interest would be released is home to the Carson City Gun Club. Once on the edge of town, the shooting range is now surrounded by commercial development and the Eagle Valley Golf Course. Although our legislation would allow Carson City to sell this land, we have asked for and received a commitment that Carson City will not sell this property until the shooting facility has been relocated to another, more appropriate location.

The first title of our legislation also transfers 50 acres of Forest Service land to the BLM. The Forest Service is also authorized to develop and implement, in partnership with Carson City, a plan for managing its land in a way that minimizes the impact of flood events on nearby residential areas.

Under Title II, 150 acres of federal lands would be made available for sale through an open and competitive process. This includes the 50 acres transferred from the Forest Service to the BLM in Title I. All of the lands identified for sale in our legislation are isolated or seriously impacted by nearby commercial or residential development. Both agencies have concluded that these parcels should be disposed of and that this action is consistent with their respective management plans.

Similar to past Nevada land bills, this legislation directs the Secretary of Interior to reinvest the proceeds of these limited land sales back into important public projects. Ninety-five percent of the proceeds will be used to acquire environmentally sensitive lands in Carson City and to protect archaeological resources. The remaining five percent of the proceeds will go to Nevada's general education program.

This title also permanently withdraws nearly 20,000 acres of BLM lands in Carson City from land sales and mineral development. These same lands, located north and east of Carson City are already *administratively* withdrawn by the BLM. This bill would make the withdrawal permanent, preserving foothill views, open space and access to public lands, in line with "Envision Carson City."

Our bill also provides guidance that Off-Highway Vehicle (OHV) use on BLM lands in Carson City should be restricted to existing roads and trails until the BLM completes their travel management planning process. The Pine Nut Mountains east of Carson City are a favorite destination for local and visiting OHV enthusiasts. This provision will better protect this area until routes can be designated.

Finally, the second title of the bill opens a new avenue for Carson City to continue their conservation efforts along the Carson River. The Southern Nevada

Public Land Management Act (SNPLMA) will be amended to authorize funds for Carson City to acquire land for parks and trails along the Carson River and to authorize conservation initiatives, also along the Carson River. In addition, we make a small change to SNPLMA which will only affect Washoe County. In the White Pine County bill of 2006 (P. L. 109-432), Washoe County was given access to SNPLMA through 2011 to acquire part of the Ballardini Ranch. The county has made good progress towards this acquisition, but may not make the 2011 deadline. We are pleased to extend the authorization to 2015.

Title III addresses the Washoe Tribe's pressing need for more land for residential and commercial development. Tribal lands adjacent to both of the colonies in Carson City, Stewart and Carson, would be expanded by this legislation. Carson Colony tribal lands would grow by over 280 acres. On this parcel, the lands located below the 5,200-foot elevation contour would be available for residential or commercial development. The lands above the 5,200-foot contour would only be available for traditional tribal uses, like ceremonial gatherings, hunting and plant collecting. Tribal lands at the Stewart Colony would grow by only 5 acres, all of which would be available for commercial and residential development.

In 2003, Senator Ensign and I passed legislation that conveyed 25 acres of Forest Service land at Skunk Harbor, on the shores of Lake Tahoe, to the Washoe Tribe. Unfortunately, the parcel was not accurately described in the legislation and consequently the land that was conveyed did not fully reflect our commitment to the Tribe. This bill includes a technical correction that will provide a long overdue fix to the Washoe Indian Tribe Trust Land Conveyance (P. L. 108-67).

Lastly, this bill directs the Forest Service to develop a cooperative agreement with the Washoe Tribe to ensure the Tribe's access across Forest Service land for their traditional "lifeway" walk to Lake Tahoe. For centuries the Washoe people have moved from the Pine Nut Mountains east of Carson City in the fall to Lake Tahoe in the summer. Our legislation ensures that they are able to continue this important tradition.

This bill, Mr. President, is built on years of public input. We believe it is a model piece of legislation and appreciate the support of our colleagues in this effort. We look forward to working with Chairman Bingaman, Ranking Member Domenici and the other distinguished members of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee to move this bill forward during the time we have remaining in this legislative session.