

Stop this land grab

By Wade Graham

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THE PROPOSED sale of federal land in Washington County, Utah, is spectacular, in the scale of both its greed and its shamelessness. Legislation has been drafted to allow county officials to steal 25,000 acres of public land near Zion National Park to benefit themselves and well-connected private developers.

I stay "steal" because the draft bill — the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act, to be sponsored by Utah Republican Sen. Robert F. Bennett and Democratic Rep. Jim Matheson — would require the federal government to sell land to private developers, then use the proceeds to buy other, less valuable land from the same developers at inflated prices. All without paying the taxpayers for their property.

As land grabs go, it is impressive, but it isn't original. The scheme's promoters are following to the letter the tired plot line of the oldest script in the West. It's Chinatown, Jake, all over again.

The movie "Chinatown," you may recall, was a fictionalized version of how, 100 years ago, Los Angeles stole water from the Owens Valley to make land development more profitable. Now, as then, politicians are trying to scare the public into believing that the future of their community depends on taxpayers footing the tab. Now, as then, the real goal is to make more profit for developers by subdividing land that the community, if it had been consulted, probably wouldn't want developed. Now, as then, the boogeyman is water scarcity. That's why the other goal is to open up protected public lands for a 130-mile-long pipeline to bring water from Lake Powell on the Colorado River.

The \$1-billion price tag for the pipeline would be conveniently covered by the taxpayers of Utah, not just Washington County, through a sales-tax increase that would last for 15 years.

To put this brazen plan into perspective, consider Washington County's recent history. County officials turned a blind eye as illegal roads were bulldozed across protected federal lands in an effort to claim them as county roads. One city, La Verkin, has declared itself a "United Nations-free zone." The town of Hildale is a polygamist stronghold whose leaders are reportedly under investigation for alleged child sexual abuse.

But Washington County's attempted water heist isn't just a local crackpot scheme: 25 million people in seven states (California, Arizona, Nevada, Utah, New Mexico, Colorado and Wyoming) and Mexico depend on the Colorado River. A new tap puts everyone's supplies in jeopardy. The county seat, St. George, already has the highest water consumption of any desert city in America: 335 gallons a person a day, twice the national average. (By comparison, Phoenix uses just 170 gallons a person a day by using basic conservation measures). The plans to expand St. George sevenfold indicate a total disconnect from reality because Washington is the driest county in the second-driest state in the country.

Despite the scare campaign, the county doesn't need new water. By simply wasting less, it would have enough for growth for 50 years, a study commissioned by the Grand Canyon Trust has shown. Even Las Vegas added 250,000 new residents between 2002 and 2005 while cutting its water use by 20 billion gallons — in part by paying homeowners \$1 per square foot of lawn changed to Xeriscape. Even without the pipeline, Washington County has already grown 73% from 1990 to 2000. It is sure to keep expanding because it has few if any land-use controls. Bringing it more cheap water would be like handing dope to an addict.

The irony is that there probably won't be enough water to fill the pipe even if it is built, because the Colorado River is already too depleted to satisfy the demands of those who hold its water rights. In the future, as the current rights holders put more straws in the Colorado, Lake Powell will be less than one-quarter full most of the time. With global warming expected to cut the Colorado River's flow by 14% to 18% in coming decades, the West has an even bigger water problem.

If Washington County succeeds in hoodwinking the taxpayers, it will be a sad commentary on how little we have learned from our history of private pillage of public resources. But it is the county that will pay the highest price, in ill-conceived sprawl disfiguring one of the most magnificent regions in America and in a dangerous dependence on water supplies that are drying up.

Utah's leaders ought to see that their state grows through responsible planning and stewardship, not through delusion, distortion and duplicity.

Congressional leaders of both parties and the public should stop this bill before it is introduced. And federal and state authorities should do a better job of safeguarding the public lands of Utah.