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Clark County's proposed 39,000 acre growth worries desert tortoise advocates

LAS VEGAS (FOX5) -

Clark County is petitioning Congress to make changes that would allow the valley to expand by 39,000 acres and add new homes, apartments, or commercial businesses.

On Tuesday, Clark County voted to take the first step that could open land outside the Las Vegas Valley for development. The two major areas targeted by the proposal are East of Interstate 15 toward Jean, and Northwest of the valley near Kyle Canyon Road and US-95.

The next step is for Clark County to petition Congress to pass a bill that would open up the land for bidding.

The land is currently run by the Bureau of Land Management. The plan would ask the federal government to open up the swaths of land for bidding. County officials predicted the developments would be a mix of residential and commercial. The plan also adds new wilderness areas and areas of critical environmental concern.

"That is to offset these additional acres that we're looking at, so in areas where we might be losing recreational amenities it's balanced out with an additional conservation area elsewhere," Marci Henson, the director of the county's department of air quality, said. Henson added that the metro area just needs more space.

"Even though it looks like there's a lot of vacant land, looks can be deceiving," she said. "There needs to be willing sellers of that land. It depends on what it is zoned for, what neighbors want that land to be used for."

Some environmental groups also have voiced concerns about what the proposed development would mean for Southern Nevada's desert tortoise, calling the plan "dangerous."

Patrick Donnelly with the Center for Biological Diversity said the public needed much more time to debate the next few decades of our county's growth.

"It has all the hallmarks of a smoky backroom deal," Donnelly said. "The public feels hoodwinked by Clark County... They want politicians, not scientists, to make decisions about the desert tortoise."