

Sen. Cortez Masto Unveils Clark County Lands Bill

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by

Heidi Kyser

On March 3, U.S. Senator Catherine Cortez Masto introduced the Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act, also known as the "[Clark County Lands Bill](#)."

The bill purports to provide enough developable land to hold a population of 3 million residents by 2060, while setting aside millions of acres of land for conservation.

All this, while also allowing for much-needed affordable housing and economic diversification, *and* combatting climate change.

"It's a combination of things when you're talking about managing growth in a community and how you balance all those interests. That's what this Clark County lands bill does," said Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto.

Cortez Masto said the bill came after lengthy discussions among a lot of stakeholders, including Clark County, federal agencies and Nevada's congressional delegation.

On the affordable housing front, Cortez Masto said the bill sets aside more than 30,000 acres for affordable and sustainable housing. It also outlines what qualifies as affordable housing and who qualifies to buy affordable housing.

"There's a number of provisions in here identifying affordable housing, making sure that homeowners, individuals, can access and have a roof over their heads," she said.

Plus, the senator said the bill creates a new category in the Southern Nevada Public Lands Management Act, otherwise known as SNPLMA.

Currently, the act allows the sale of public land with the money from the sale being funneled back to the state or the community.

Under the county land bill, entities looking to improve regional sustainability, increase climate resilience and reduce greenhouse gas emissions can apply for SNPLMA funds.

Critics of the proposal have said it will lead to more sprawl, more traffic and more pollution in Southern Nevada.

Patrick Donnelly is the Nevada state director for the Center for Biological Diversity.

While changes to the bill have been made since it was first floated in 2017, Donnelly said those modifications do not change the dynamic of the bill, which he believes encourages sprawl.

"This bill would set aside over 40,000 acres of land for new development outside of the current growth boundary of Las Vegas," he said.

Donnelly explained the growth boundary was established 20 years ago with the creation of SNPLMA. The so-called ring around the valley set a boundary to limit growth. Now, he questions the point of creating it when it was just going to get bumped out after 20 years.

"Are we going to keep expanding that boundary every 20 years," he said, "And if so, doesn't that render a growth boundary entirely meaningless?"

Most of the land that would open for development under the proposed bill would be along the Interstate 15 corridor from Sloan to the California border, Donnelly said, it would then branch east to an area known as Hidden Valley.

The ultimate goal would be to create a logistics and heavy industrial corridor that connects the Las Vegas valley to a proposed airport near Jean.

"Functionally, if this bill passed and the airport was built out, you could have wall-to-wall development from the California border to all the way to Apex," he said.

Donnelly said if the development goes forward it will come with huge climate impacts.

"New carbon emissions, which exacerbate the climate crisis and send us ever further towards a climate catastrophe," he said, "Whereas there are ways we can develop that mitigate our impacts on climate and perhaps sends us towards a cleaner future."

He said 65 square miles of sprawl south of the city is not the way to a climate-friendly future.

Cortez Masto disagreed that the county lands bill will lead to more sprawl. She believes it is a path forward for the region.

"We don't have the option of doing nothing," she said, "If we do nothing, then I would say there is going to be sprawl and concerns about [pollution from traffic], but this is just the opposite. This legislation is bringing in all the stakeholders and talking about how we manage smart growth. How we manage smart transportation. How we look for efficient water use and clean energy and reduce our greenhouse gas emissions."

While Sen. Cortez Masto believes the county lands bill will address a number of issues going forward, she admits it doesn't do everything needed to combat climate change and sustainability.

She pointed out that she has a suite of legislation to address some of those topics like a plan in the next infrastructure package to promote electric vehicles and fund charging stations along highways.

There is also a bill that would hand out grants to older schools to help upgrade their facilities to be more efficient and their technology more connected.

"It's not just all going to be in this one piece of legislation that just focuses on the land," she said.

Besides opening public land for development, the bill also protects millions of acres of land in Southern Nevada.

Grace Palermo is the director of Southern Nevada programs for Friends of Nevada Wilderness. She said there a number of things in the bill to excited about, including the expansion of the Red Rock National Conservation Area and permanent protection for the Desert National Wildlife Refuge.

The refuge has been the center of a battle between conservationists and the military. The Air Force wanted to expand its use of areas of the refuge for bombing and other exercises.

The defense authorization bill that recently passed stopped that take over, but Palermo said if the county land bill passes, there be even more protection for the area.

"We've seen over the years that the military has come back pretty much annually to try and make the expansion happen again," she said, "This bill would be a huge step to permanently protecting the desert refuge."

She said that Nevadans have been united in protecting the refuge from a military expansion and keeping it open for the public to use.

Palermo said that if you're not a person who likes to get out into Nevada's wilderness, preserving it is important.

"If if you never go there, they're where we get a lot of clean water, where the Colorado starts up in the Rockies and where we get a lot of fresh air," she said, "They're incredibly important resources and help protect those important things for us, as well as critical wildlife habitat and important cultural resources that can be found in these areas."

For his part, Donnelly and his group support the conservation of fragile areas of Southern Nevada, but he doesn't believe that protecting those important areas mitigates the damage done by expanding the city's footprint.

KNPR News requested someone from Clark County join the discussion, but no one was available. The county did send the following statement:

The Southern Nevada Economic Development and Conservation Act introduced in the U.S. Senate last week by Sen. Catherine Cortez Masto and supported by the entire Nevada congressional delegation provides a smart, balanced blueprint for Clark County's future. The bill calls for the expansion of tribal trust lands, facilitates more affordable housing projects and provides opportunities to diversify our economy and create new jobs in Clark County. The legislation was built in consultation with local, regional and national stakeholders after years of collaboration.

Additionally, the bill includes more than 353,000 acres identified as special management areas for the protection of endangered plants and animals and 1.6 million acres for wilderness areas. The bill is anticipated to generate \$3.35 billion in funding for additional parks, trails and natural areas for Clark County residents and visitors alike to enjoy and provides new funding for sustainability and climate action projects.

For all those reasons, Clark County supports Sen. Cortez Masto's proposed legislation.