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Our View: How much are you willing to pay to protect the Foothills and create new parks and Greenbelt paths?

Preserving Ada County's best places to play will require plenty of hard work.

Not to mention partnerships and money.

A 21-member task force has taken the long view of Ada County's open space and recreation needs, now and for decades to come. The group wants to build on the best the area has to offer - its Foothills trails and the Boise River Greenbelt.

The group also wants to enhance recreation elsewhere in the southern end of the county, including the Snake River Birds of Prey area.

The next move belongs to elected officials, and to all of us. The task force has done its job - and has performed an invaluable public service - by thinking big over 13 months and offering bold suggestions:

Ada County and its cities must keep working on the Boise River Greenbelt, adding to the 9.6 miles now under county jurisdiction. For those turned off by the ongoing imbroglio over bike access in the Garden City Greenbelt, the task force reminds us all of the long-term goal: a path extending into Canyon County.

Pursue a similar trail and Greenbelt system along the Snake River.

Use land swaps, purchases and partnerships to piece together additional open space and develop new trails in the Foothills.

This is essential, since Ada County could well map the course of the Foothills trails network. The city of Boise is still active in the preservation game, with about \$4 million left from its Foothills property tax levy. As development occurs north of Eagle, the city of Eagle will be a key Foothills player.

The county's role is to fuse together what the open space plan calls an "interconnected system" of pathways and trails.

Develop new large, multi-faceted "regional parks" throughout the county, modeled after the 67-acre, county-owned Barber Park.

With the long list of ideas comes an equally long list of possible funding sources. Some options come at no cost to the taxpayer, such as grant dollars and foundation money. This list also includes park impact fees and user fees to voter-approved general obligation bonds or property tax levies similar to Boise's \$10 million Foothills levy.

This gets down to your money. How much are you willing to pay to play? That's worth your attention.

So it was disappointing Thursday - two days after the Earth Day release of the open space task force report - when two of the three Republicans running in a contested primary for Ada County commissioner said they haven't looked at its findings. Steve Kimball and Jay Larsen said they hadn't read the report; Sharon Ullman said she has reviewed the report, but thinks the county should focus its dollars on public safety.

"I think the county needs to get out of the parks business," she said.

There's no disputing the county's public safety role - from running a jail to dispatching deputies across the county. But some entity would need to spearhead the initiatives envisioned by the task force.

Someone would need to work with the cities, the U.S. Forest Service and the Bureau of Land Management on Foothills trails.

Someone would need to coordinate the effort to protect riverside land that is, according to the task force report, "threatened by development and incompatible land use." Someone would need to work with Idaho Power, the state and neighboring counties to replicate the Boise River Greenbelt success along the Snake.

That entity is the county.

The task force's recommendations are strictly advisory. But the open space report was prepared in conjunction with the rewrite of Ada County's comprehensive land use plan, a document that will guide future development and zoning decisions.

Growth cannot come at the expense of the open space and accessible recreational opportunities that make Ada County special. This is the task force's underlying message; it's up to voters to insist on action.

"Our View" is the editorial position of the Idaho Statesman. It is an unsigned opinion expressing the consensus of the Statesman's editorial board. To comment on an editorial or suggest a topic, e-mail editorial@idahostatesman.com.