

- PRELIMINARY ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT - SALT LAKE FOREST SERVICE OFFICE AND LAND EXCHANGE

CHAPTER 1 - PURPOSE AND NEED

1.1 Background

This preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) is intended to document the analysis of a proposed land exchange involving properties located within the boundaries of Holladay City and the City of Cottonwood Heights. In addition, this analysis will address the construction of a Forest Service office and warehouse at the site that is proposed for federal acquisition. Currently, the Forest Service owns a 4.17-acre parcel of land located southeast of the intersection of 6200 South and 3000 East in Holladay. A parcel approximately 2.32 acres in size at 6801 South 3000 East has been offered in exchange for the federal land. The offered property consists of .75 acres owned by Big Cottonwood Creek Associates, L.C. (Cottonwood Partners Development Corporation), the proponent, and about 1.57 acres currently owned by the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) and used as a highway maintenance facility. Both properties are isolated tracts, approximately 1 mile from the Wasatch-Cache NF proclaimed boundary and surrounded by commercial development. Figure A depicts the location of both properties.

In the early 1990s, efforts were underway to locate the Salt Lake District office and warehouse on Guardsman Way, in Salt Lake City. However, concerns arose about compatibility of a Forest Service office with the neighborhood. Consequently, those plans were abandoned and in 1993 the Forest Service acquired 4.17 acres of vacant land southeast of the intersection of 6200 South and 3000 East in Holladay (Figure B). At the time, it was thought this land could be used for a new District office, or that it could be included in a future land exchange for a more favorable office site.

As the property at 6200 South was more closely evaluated, it became apparent ingress and egress from 6200 South would be problematic for Forest Service and office visitor traffic and that the narrow configuration of the property was not well suited for a new office and warehouse. In addition, a water transmission easement extending across the property significantly limits office development options. In order to select a more suitable office location, the Forest Service solicited proposals for a land exchange in 2004.

Of the proposals received in response to the solicitation, one was selected that would best meet the needs of the agency and is the proposed action in this EA. It involves property currently owned by UDOT at about 6801 South 3000 East and a small adjoining property owned by the proponent. This combined 2.32-acre parcel is located approximately six blocks north of the current leased office at 6944 South 3000 East.

1.2 Proposed Action

If approved, the proposed action would include two components:

- Exchange of 4.17 acres of National Forest System land located along 6200 South for approximately 2.32 acres of land currently owned by Cottonwood Partners and UDOT, and
- Construction and operation of an approximate 20,000 square foot office and 10,000 square foot warehouse on the land that would be acquired by the Forest Service

It is anticipated the Forest Service office building would be a two- to three-story structure and that all facilities would be consistent with Cottonwood Heights requirements and built in a style that would complement existing neighborhood aesthetics. The land exchange would be completed under the authority of the Forest Service Facilities Realignment and Enhancement Act of 2005. The facilities constructed would be done using sustainable building standards based on Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design criteria. Prior to completion of the land exchange, a real estate appraisal would be completed to ensure the Forest Service receives fair market value in the transaction. Any excess value that might be attributable to the greater acreage for the 6200 South property would be applied to site development and construction costs at the new location.

As a part of the transaction, Cottonwood Partners would install a road system to serve the Forest Service facility and would reconstruct the intersection at 3000 East and 6580 South (E Cottonwood Pkwy) as a four-way intersection with a stoplight. This would allow a new access road to be developed into the property just south of Big Cottonwood Creek which would serve both the Forest Service and UDOT. As proposed, UDOT would retain ownership of this entire road corridor, from the intersection with 3000 East to its resized maintenance yard.

1.3 Purpose and Need

The purpose this proposal is to secure a location and build a new office for a combined, Salt Lake Ranger District and Forest Supervisor's Office that:

1. improves customer service;
2. is efficient for District field operations – including proximity to the Tri-Canyon area and provides room for a warehouse, wildland fire engine and facilities;
3. increases funding available for field programs and projects;
4. is compatible with neighborhood developments; and
5. offers convenient vehicle ingress and egress from city streets.

Currently, the Salt Lake Ranger District Office is located at 6944 South 3000 East, within incorporated Cottonwood Heights. This leased office and storage area space has served as administrative office for Salt Lake Ranger District since 1978. Office space, parking,

and storage are extremely limited at the current facility. In addition, the location and the office itself are not well suited to providing visitor information services because of limited parking and reception area space.

The headquarters for the 1.3 million-acre Wasatch-Cache National Forest, generally referred to as the Forest Supervisor's Office, is located in leased office space in the Federal Building at 125 South State Street in Salt Lake City. Limited parking, downtown traffic, and the lack of visibility for visitors compromise opportunities to offer quality and effective visitor information services from this location. In 2005, combined lease costs for the Salt Lake District Office and the Forest Supervisor's Office totaled nearly \$428,000 and are certain to increase in the future as contracts expire and are renegotiated. With many demands on the Forest's budget, lease costs represent an ever-increasing share of its total operating costs. There is a need to reduce the financial impact of leasing by securing government-owned facilities that would allow more funding to reach on-the-ground programs.

1.4 Decision to be Made

The decision to be made regarding this proposal is whether or not to proceed with the land exchange and office and warehouse construction as described in the proposed action. Jeanne Evenden, Forest Service Intermountain Director of Lands, is the responsible official for the land exchange. Wasatch-Cache Forest Supervisor Faye Krueger is the Forest Service official responsible for approving construction of the office and warehouse complex.

1.5 Public Involvement

In May 2006, a public scoping notice outlining the project proposal was mailed to 54 groups, individuals, agencies, and organizations. A copy of this notice was also posted on the Wasatch-Cache National Forest website at:

<http://www.fs.fed.us/r4/wcnf/projects/proposed/>

The scoping notice provided for a 30-day comment period and three comment letters or emails were received during this period.

1.6 Issues

The proposal was reviewed by a team of Forest Service biologists and other resource specialists in order to identify issues associated with completing the land exchange and constructing the office and warehouse facilities. Their review included site visits, literature searches, and preparation of various reports, including a Biological Assessment and Biological Evaluation. While some concerns were surfaced by this team regarding building aesthetics and design, no natural resource issues were identified that merited detailed study.

A number of issues were identified in the three comment letters received during the public scoping period. These have been summarized and paraphrased below:

- ◆ There is concern about the proposal's consistency with the Forest Plan, National Forest Management Act, fire plans, and wildland-urban interface requirements.
- ◆ Impacts to vegetation, wildlife and wildlife habitat including big game winter range are issues that should be carefully considered in the analysis.
- ◆ No category has been established that would allow this project to be excluded from documentation in either an Environmental Assessment or Environmental Impact Statement. In addition, there is uncertainty about the significance of the effects of implementing the proposal. Because of these issues an EA or EIS should be prepared.
- ◆ Exchanging 4 plus acres for 2 plus acres in the same prime development area doesn't seem like good business sense. Having over 4 acres will better allow for use years from now.
- ◆ The 6200 South office location, just after travelers exit I-215, is a far better location than the UDOT yard in terms of being visible to the many visitors to the National Forest.
- ◆ The 6200 South property is encumbered with a large water transmission easement that must be protected.

CHAPTER 2 - ALTERNATIVES

2.1 Alternatives Considered But Eliminated From Detailed Study

NEPA requires consideration of all reasonable alternatives. In this case, some potential alternatives are eliminated from detailed review because they would not adequately address the purpose and need for action. Alternatives eliminated from further study are summarized below, along with the rationale for their dismissal.

2.1.1 Construct Facilities on Forest Service Property at 6200 South

This alternative would involve constructing one or both of the two office facilities on property already in federal ownership. As noted above, a close review of this property identified serious issues associated with development of this site as a Forest Service office and warehouse facility. First, the relatively narrow configuration of the property presents problems for designing parking, internal traffic flow, and making efficient use of the space. Second, while vehicle entry to the property is available from eastbound 6200 South, entry directly from westbound 6200 South is very difficult. Providing for traffic exiting the property would also presents serious challenges. Specifically, while eastbound 6200 South vehicles would encounter few problems, those traveling the other direction would be forced to negotiate several narrow roads that serve other businesses and establishments and their parking areas, and then exit via 3000 South. Finally, a large

easement for a water transmission line extends across the west end of the property. It is required that this easement be protected and this constrains Forest Service development options for the 6200 South parcel. In addition, there are concerns that a Forest Service warehouse, fire station, and associated work activities may not be compatible with surrounding retail and office buildings.

This alternative was considered during a 2004 review and the limitations above were the reason a prospectus was issued soliciting proposals for a land exchange for a new office site. As a part of this EA, this alternative was revisited and determined to not be consistent with the purpose and need for action, including improving customer service, providing convenient ingress and egress for vehicles, being compatible with neighborhood developments, and effectively supporting field operations.

2.1.2 Prospectus Land Exchange Options

Since it acquired the land in 1993, the Forest Service received frequent inquiries about selling the 6200 South tract, or exchanging it for other property. Based on a list developed from this input, the solicitation for a prospectus land exchange was sent to 20 realtors, developers, and individuals. Probably due to the limited land base available for development in the Salt Lake Valley and the geographic constraint that the office be located relatively near to the Tri-Canyon area, only four proposals were submitted. All the proposals were submitted by Cottonwood Partners. Besides the proposed action outlined above, the prospectus proposals included parcels of land located at 9300 Wasatch Boulevard, 6851 South Big Cottonwood Canyon Road, and 3900 South and Wasatch Boulevard. The two Wasatch Boulevard properties were dismissed from consideration because the location of the tract would not provide adequate public access or because of traffic concerns. In the case of the East Big Cottonwood Canyon Road property, an agreement could not be reached with the landowner.

2.1.3 Combined Supervisor's and Salt Lake District Offices Downtown

One comment received during scoping suggested that the Salt Lake Ranger District Office be co-located with the Forest Supervisor's Office which is already housed in leased office space in the Federal Building on State Street. Then, if demonstrated to be necessary, a garage or warehouse could be built somewhere in the vicinity of the local canyons.

This alternative was not carried into detailed study for a number of operational and financial reasons. First, it's been long recognized that parking, traffic, and lack of visibility seriously compromise visitor information services at the downtown Federal Building. Second, it's important that Salt Lake District personnel, both permanent staff and seasonal employees, are within a relatively short distance of the Tri-Canyon area, which probably accounts for 70 percent or more of each day's field destinations. In addition, a 2006 Forest Service facilities analysis clearly indicated the need for a work center, warehouse, and fire engine and suppression facilities. Separating the permanent staff who supervise field operations from the various crews, which total 20 to 30 seasonal

employees, by a 20 to 25 minute drive would be very inefficient. Since Forest Service office space would still be leased, there would be little or no savings that could be redirected to field programs.

2.2 Alternatives Included For Detailed Study

Two alternatives are considered in detail in this EA and are described below.

2.2.1 Alternative A - Proposed Action

Alternative A involves completion of the land exchange and office and warehouse construction as described in Section 1.2. Under this alternative, the land exchange is estimated to be completed in 2007. Construction could also begin later in 2007 and could extend several years.

2.2.1 Alternative B - No Action

The No Action Alternative assumes the land exchange will not be completed and the Forest Supervisor's and Salt Lake District offices will remain in their current locations. Federal land at 6200 South would essentially remain a vacant lot, surrounded by commercial development. Given that UDOT has identified the property as excess to their needs and that Cottonwood Partners has an interest in developing their adjacent property, it likely that a commercial or retail development of some kind would eventually be constructed on the offered tract on 3000 East.

2.3 Alternative Comparison

Chapter 3 of this EA includes a detailed discussion of the effects of implementing Alternatives A and B. A summary of these impacts is presented below.

2.3.1 Alternative A – Proposed Action

Under this alternative, property at 6200 South would be developed, mostly likely in the form of multi-story commercial office, restaurant, and retail spaces. A Forest Service office complex and warehouse would be constructed on the offered property along 3000 East. Impacts to the physical environment associated with Alternative A include the typical ones associated with construction, grading, and excavation and the associated impacts of erosion and sediment production.

Impacts related to the biological environment at the two sites includes primarily vegetation disturbance. Most of the 6200 South property has previously been graded or excavated, there are extensive areas of bare soil, and little remains of native species. In addition, noxious weeds have infested portions of the land. The 3000 East property is largely comprised of a parking lot and fuel storage facility. Given these factors, there

would a minimal impact to the biological environment as result of land exchange and construction at both sites.

Social and other human environment impacts would mostly be associated with a change in the visual character of the two properties as they are developed commercially in the case of the 6200 South parcel, and Forest Service office and warehouse complex at 3000 East. Many would likely see these developments as an improvement to the existing appearance of these two parcels, though it would contribute to the loss of undeveloped space in a rapidly growing portion of the Salt Lake Valley.

In eliminating lease costs, much of the savings could be redirected to field operations where budgets are declining. Though it is difficult to estimate at this point, some additional costs for building and grounds maintenance would be incurred with Forest Service-owned, versus leased facilities. With proper signing near I-215, easy ingress and egress from 3000 East and adequate parking and ample office space, the new facility would offer a dramatic improvement for National Forest visitors and for those doing business with the Forest Service. Operationally, the new facility offers a location with ready access to high visitation areas of the Ranger District and the most common destination of District employee field trips.

2.3.2 Alternative B – No Action

Under the No Action Alternative the 4.17-acre 6200 South parcel would remain undeveloped, while the offered property at 3000 South would likely see commercial and retail development. With respect to the later property, there would be little difference in terms of most environmental impacts between this alternative and installation of Forest Service facilities in the same area. As noted above the 3000 East property would either remain as part of UDOT's maintenance operation, or be developed in the manner of surrounding commercial spaces. The 6200 South property would continue as a substantially disturbed area, with sparse natural vegetation and encroaching noxious weeds.

With respect to operations under this alternative, the Salt Lake District Office would continue to be located in a leased office and warehouse facility that has clearly inadequate parking and insufficient warehouse, shop, and fire suppression space. In addition, both the Forest Supervisor's Office and Salt Lake District Office would continue to struggle in offering visitor information services from inadequate facilities. On the other hand, the current District office location would offer ready access for employees to canyon work destinations. From a financial standpoint, the Forest Service would incur office space lease costs of \$428,000 annually, a figure that is almost certain to increase in the future.

CHAPTER 3.0 - AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT AND ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

[Will be available in final Environmental Assessment]



FIGURE A



6200 South Property - Forest Service Property for Exchange



3000 East Offered Property and Proposed Office Site

FIGURE B