

The Salt Lake Tribune

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Article Last Updated: 6/02/2005 02:55 AM

Counties, BLM ease tensions over monument signs

Capitol meeting: Officials meet at Governor's Office and the talks lower "the level of acrimony"

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The Salt Lake Tribune

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The basic conflicts have not gone away. Nor will they any time soon.

But it appears that a lengthy meeting Wednesday morning at the Utah Capitol complex has, at least for the moment, reduced tensions between Kane County and the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in their escalating battle over rights-of-way issues in and around the Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument.

At the behest of Lt. Gov. Gary Herbert, a group of BLM officials, Kane and Garfield County commissioners, and members of the Attorney General's staff met for 2 1/2 hours behind closed doors at the Governor's Office in a bid to get the two sides talking again.

In that sense, "it was a productive meeting," said Herbert. "There are still differences of opinion. But we're not enemies. We have common goals. One of the real benefits of this was lowering the level of acrimony."

The BLM and Kane County have been jousting over rights-of-way issues since 2003, when county officials removed a series of BLM road signs banning off-highway vehicles from the monument - an incident which is under investigation by the U.S. Attorney's Office.

Tensions escalated earlier this year after the county began placing its own OHV route signs on BLM land, including a Wilderness Study Area and along the Hole-in-the-Rock Road in the monument. And the conflict reached a crescendo last month, when state BLM Director Sally Wisely ordered the county to remove all of its signs from federal land - or face a lawsuit. The county has since voluntarily removed 52 signs in the monument, but left the others in place.

"I don't know at this point if anything has really changed, but we did have a good dialogue, and I hope that can continue," said Wisely, who two weeks ago asked the Interior Department's regional solicitor to begin taking the next legal steps against the county.

Kane County has claimed all of the roads in question as part of its countywide transportation system, and cites RS 2477 - a Civil War-era law granting rights-of-way to local governments across federal land - as the foundation of its claim.

Like Wisely, Kane County Commissioner Mark Habbeshaw says those fundamentals haven't changed. He expects - and wants - a suit as a way to settle the dispute.

"But it is safe to say that there was some movement towards common ground," Habbeshaw said. "We certainly haven't resolved the legal issues, but we have all committed to a spirit of cooperation and dialogue. I think we can use future meetings to work on areas we can agree on."

Herbert says bringing all of the sides together Wednesday was part of a larger effort by Gov. Jon Huntsman Jr. to find new solutions to old, lingering public lands disputes.

"This administration doesn't have any history in what is really an eight-year war," Herbert said, dating the Kane-BLM conflict back to the monument's creation in 1996. "Our hope is to lower the rhetoric and get something done, as opposed to all the saber rattling. This meeting was a start in that direction."