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Grand County bails on eastern Utah infrastructure group

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One of the first things a new Grand County Council did this week was drop membership in a multi-county infrastructure coalition for energy-rich eastern Utah.

The decision reverses a vote the seven-member council took two weeks before the November election, over strident objections from Moab residents.

In the end, three new council members opposed to joining the oil-and-gas-focused coalition were elected. And they followed through on promises to their constituents Tuesday night.

“It was obvious the majority of the people in this county did not want it,” said new council member Mary McGann. “It took control from the county, as opposed to giving us control.”

A 3rd-grade teacher, she won the council’s at-large seat in the Nov. 4 election against incumbent Jim Nyland. McGann was among three successful candidates who vocally opposed the county’s participation on the coalition.

Critics believe membership would tie Grand County, a world-renowned redrock tourist destination, to transportation projects designed to promote oil and gas drilling and strip mining at the expense of Moab’s recreation economy.

Last year, Grand County officials hammered out an “interlocal” agreement with Uintah, Duchesne, Emery, Carbon, San Juan and Daggett counties to form a partnership that combines clout to pursue public funding for rail, highway and other projects addressing transportation problems holding back energy development in rural Utah.

Most of the county commissions signed off on the agreement with little fuss.

But it became an issue in Grand County, where many residents oppose industrial expansion into scenic lands that support most of the area's tourism jobs.

Coalition membership was the defining issue in all three council races decided in November. On Oct. 21, the seven-member council voted 6-1 to join the coalition in front of a room packed with opponents.

Lynn Jackson, who was then the council chairman and a key champion of the coalition, argued membership would enable Grand County influence over the coalition's priorities, while also ensuring veto power over proposed projects in the county. He complained critics distorted the issue and were fear-mongering.

Others argue membership would help Grand County diversify its economy to capture more jobs connected with resource extraction, which pay better than the seasonal work associated with tourism.

On Tuesday, Jackson and Rory Paxton voted to remain with the coalition. But Councilman Ken Ballantyne switched positions, voting with the three council newcomers and new Chairwoman Elizabeth Tubbs to reject coalition membership.

Jackson could not be reached for comment on Wednesday.

The coalition had yet to accept the county as a member, and the Grand County attorney had not signed off on the coalition agreement, according to new council member Chris Baird.

"We wanted to get out before they put us in. That is why we acted so fast to rescind that motion," Baird said. "We don't want anything to do with the coalition, period."

Coalition critics worried membership would obligate Grand County to financially support infrastructure associated with moving oil, gas and coal and other projects of questionable value to a community that depends on attracting tourists from around the world. They argued it would be unwise to take on financial risks that extractive industries should be bearing themselves.

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