

OFF-ROADERS LIKE HANDS OFF

ATV users worry county-BLM deal might restrict use of Nellis Dunes

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THREE PUBLIC FORUMS THIS WEEK

The Bureau of Land Management will hold three public meetings this week on a proposal to transfer the Nellis Dunes to Clark County.

Tuesday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the community room of the North Las Vegas Library, 2300 Civic Center Drive.

Wednesday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. inside the Clark County Commission's chambers at the Clark County Government Center, 500 S. Grand Central Parkway.

Thursday from 6 p.m. to 8 p.m. in Grand Ballroom B at the Henderson Convention Center, 200 S. Water St.



Off-roaders ride Friday at the Nellis Dunes. Clark County and Bureau of Land Management officials have been discussing since 2005 whether the county should oversee the dunes, one of two sizable areas in Southern Nevada where off-road riding is unrestricted. Photo by [Gary Thompson](#)

Amid a dusty, brown expanse, Oscar Gutierrez jumps onto a trailer to unload three ATVs so he and his two sons can zoom across the desert sand.

Their motocross-style coveralls strike a contrast against the sun-parched terrain, where both nature and the government impose few restrictions on the rider.

At the Nellis Dunes, northeast of Las Vegas, not far from the Las Vegas Motor Speedway, there are no tracks, no fences, no traffic cops, no fees. Just 10,000 acres of dirt and sand.

Gutierrez, 37, who rides there with his sons Oscar, 13, and Jesus, 10, once a month, likes it that way. "Here in Vegas, we don't have places to go to have fun for free," Gutierrez said.

But the dunes' wide-open freedom -- and free rides -- could change if Clark County takes over the land from the Bureau of Land Management.

County and BLM officials have been discussing since 2005 whether the county should oversee the Nellis Dunes, one of the two sizable areas in Southern Nevada where off-road riding is unrestricted. The other is Armagosa Sand Dunes, about 100 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Members of the public will have a chance to weigh in on the proposal this week at three forums the BLM will host on Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday.

"The BLM wants what's best for the county," said Robert Wandel, the agency's recreation planner for the district. "We're asking the public, 'Is this the right time, the right place?'"

County officials argue that a local government has more staffing and resources to manage an area park than a federal agency does. The county can better police the dunes, ensure riders' safety and minimize environmental impacts, said Michael Pop, the county's senior planning analyst.

The county is also better able to partner with businesses and off-road clubs to create racing venues at the site, Popp said. He noted that the county wants to develop multiple tracks to

serve varying skill levels and machines, while keeping a large open area for cross-country riders.



A dune buggy races through the Nellis Dunes on Friday. Clark County wants to create an off-road park on the 10,000-acre site.

Photo by [Gary Thompson](#).

"We're looking at an all-motorsports park that has something for everybody," Popp said.

No fees have been discussed, he said. A citizens advisory group would decide how much to charge users.

Gutierrez said he shouldn't have to pay to ride in a public park.

"It's not fair," he said. "We're paying so much in taxes."

J.D. Smith, whose company offers guided off-road treks, said he's unsure whether the county would be the best steward.

"We don't really know what their ulterior motive is," Smith said. "We're concerned, long term, that the county will move in and shut it down, and develop it commercially."

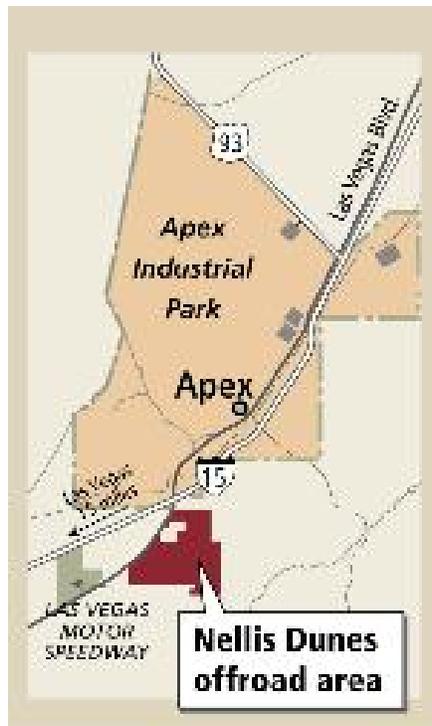
Popp insisted that the county's main interest is recreation.

The county would explore some economic development on land near Las Vegas Boulevard, such as a sand-and-gravel site, Popp said. However, retail would be out, which means no restaurants or gas stations.

Meanwhile, the park would benefit from stronger local management, he said.

Hard surfaces would be placed near entrances to suppress dust. Rare plants -- the Las Vegas buckwheat and bear poppy -- would be safeguarded and replaced if damaged, Popp said.

County staff would ensure riders wear helmets, and that fast riders stay clear of slower family tracks, he said. Trash dumped at the park would be cleaned up more quickly than it is now, he said. There also would be more local police than federal law enforcement to patrol the park.



Congress must approve BLM's transferring the land to the county, Popp said, adding that he hopes lawmakers act on it soon.

"It's in their hands," he said.

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