



Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn talks to Roberta Matlick (l) Friday in the Bishop City Park as Inyo County Supervisor Linda Arcularius listens. Photo by Jon Klusmire

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Hahn: I'm just here to listen

L.A. mayor doesn't bring a conservation plan with him during visit to the Owens Valley

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Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn is a man without a plan.

That's the theme he stressed over the past two days during meetings with local officials and residents held to gather input on the possibility of blanketing the Owens Valley with a conservation easement that would forestall development on land owned by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

"I don't have a pre-determined solution or outcome," Hahn said at a Friday afternoon press conference in Bishop. There's been a lot of talk about "who should be at the table" to discuss the pros and cons of an easement, "but we don't even have a table, yet," Hahn added.

That was the same theme Hahn struck when he sat down with Mono County officials on Thursday. "My expectations are to hear the ideas," he said.

And he heard plenty of ideas. And plenty of questions.

During his whirlwind trip through the valley Hahn said he heard "a lot of different viewpoints, and that's been helpful to me."

Hahn said the dialog between L.A.

and the Owens Valley will continue and become more formalized, with a deputy mayor coming to the area for monthly talks.

There remain "a lot of questions" about the future of LADWP's lands, Hahn said, but there are also "some exciting possibilities."

Inyo County officials appeared somewhat reassured that there was still plenty of time for the county and its citizens to provide input and ideas concerning the 320,000 acres of LADWP lands in Inyo County.

"The mayor had no plans" to present regarding the possible conservation easement, said First District Inyo County Supervisor Linda Arcularius. "This was the first step, just the beginning" in exploring the myriad of issues involved in any sort of easement, she added after Hahn and county officials met in Bishop on Friday morning.

"There will be a process, and it will be open," the mayor told the group, according to Fourth District Supervisor and Board Chairman Butch Hambleton. No timetable or deadline was proposed by Hahn to complete any action on the conservation easement idea, Hambleton added.

At the press conference, Hahn addressed both the timing of any plan and took a sidelong swipe at the two L.A. city council members who first floated the easement idea.

"I'm not interested in a half-baked idea coming out of the L.A. City Hall," he said. Instead, he would be pursuing a process to gather "everyone's viewpoint and input," because,

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"we've got to get this right."

Nor should the upcoming elections in L.A. drive any hasty decisions, he noted. "I don't think politics should play a role here ... I'm not interested in a rush job."

Hahn told the Inyo County officials "he appreciates local governments' role" in any conservation or land use decision, said Arcularius, "and we appreciated him telling us that."

The Friday meeting was the first time Inyo County officials had met with Hahn to discuss the idea of a conservation easement in the Owens Valley since the concept became public at the first of the month.

At their regular meeting on Tuesday, the full board stressed that any effort by Los Angeles to install a conservation easement on its land in Inyo County should include the county from the very start. The supervisors also stated that the public should be involved as early as possible, and that an "open public process" should be established to address the issues surrounding any possible conservation easement or the imposition of any other type of restrictions on LADWP lands. Those land holdings include 320,000 acres in Inyo County and about 40,000 acres in Mono County.

With no development on LADWP land and very little building on Inyo County's private land, the supervisors also questioned the need for any mechanism to stop development and the sense of urgency expressed by proponents of an easement plan.

Hahn said he realized there was



Los Angeles Mayor James Hahn gets a little closer to his work while fishing on the Owens River Friday under the watchful eye of Dick Noles. *Photo by Susan Morning*

should be able to live and thrive in the valley while preserving "the main attraction" that brings them here, namely open space and outstanding recreational opportunities.

The land LADWP holds inside local towns could possibly be developed, but Hahn added he got the sense no one wanted to see a large-scale expansion of towns and subdivisions up and down the valley.

When asked if a conservation easement is necessary since LADWP owns the land and water rights already, and can thus control or stop development, Hahn said he heard several times, "what are you trying to fix?"

He noted that for about 100 years, LADWP has not allowed development in the valley, essential water resources. "It's a mess," Hahn said. "I'm going to continue to ask the ques-

tion that needs to be answered.

Hahn's trip to the valley started with two open, public meetings in Mono County on Thursday, while the meetings he held with Inyo County officials, Indian tribes and business leaders on Friday were all closed to the press and public. The mayor also attended a private barbecue at a local ranch and went fishing on the Owens River during his visit. (He got skunked.)

Hahn never mentioned the detailed plan for a conservation easement on LADWP land that has been proposed by environmental groups.

Hahn has said whatever occurs, the city would remain in control of its land and water in the valley and manage any potential conservation easement. He categorically rejected the idea that a third party, either the state or a land conservancy, would be allowed to manage any potential easement.

Accompanying Hahn to the valley was Dominick Rubalcava, LADWP board president and one of Hahn's closest advisors. Rubalcava initially opposed any move to place a conservation easement on LADWP land, and has since talked about other ways to preserve the land as open space while still allowing some sort of development, especially in and around the valley's towns.

County officials did not discuss any potential impacts or issues a conservation easement might create with regard to the Inyo-L.A. Long Term Water Agreement and other ongoing water-related issues and legal cases.

Hahn said any proposal would "honor agreements" in place regarding LADWP's water-related operations and the commitments laid out in those agreements and other legally binding settlements or court orders.