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Salt Lake Tribune, The (UT)

Date: January 7, 2004

Section: Utah

Edition: Final

Page: B5

Trails, roads erased from list of byways

Thomas Burr The Salt Lake Tribune

Eight trails and dirt roads that secretly were added to a list of byways that Salt Lake County wanted to own should be scratched, the County Council decided Tuesday. The council unanimously voted to support county Mayor Nancy Workman's decision to drop those eight routes from being considered in potential litigation over rights of way across federal lands.

But Salt Lake City officials and environmental groups wonder how the Big Cottonwood Canyon byways appeared on the list in the first place.

The issue stems from a 19th century law known as Revised Statute 2477, or RS2477, which allowed counties to build and own roads across federal lands. The law was reversed in 1976, and existing roads were included in a grandfather clause.

Counties across the state -- primarily in southern Utah -- have compiled lists of roads they want to own. The Utah Attorney General's Office is now determining which of those roads to pursue with the U.S. Department of the Interior.

The then-Salt Lake County Commission approved 15 roads to be submitted in 2000 but, sometime later, eight others mysteriously appeared on that list without public notice.

"I've never been able to understand why these were added," said Jeff Niermeyer, deputy director of the Salt Lake City Public Utilities Department. The city is concerned that county ownership could lead to development in **watershed** areas that serve tens of thousands of residents in Salt Lake City and the valley's unincorporated east bench.

"It gave us great pause to see these proposed."

Save Our Canyons, also has concerns.

"Why were they there in the first place?" asked Gale Dick, president of the Salt Lake City-based environmental group. "And what else do they have up their sleeves?"

Dick, though, applauded the move by Workman and the County Council to drop these trails and dirt roads from consideration. "It was a very good step," he said. "I hope they continue this process."

Councilman Joe Hatch pushed the resolution Tuesday. He praised Workman for her move. "Let's not spend any more time on this," he said. "Let them waste time in southern Utah."

Workman said she didn't know how the roads appeared on the list. "It just sort of happened. I wasn't engaged in that."

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