

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

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WATT ASKS WESTERN GOVERNORS TO IDENTIFY FEDERAL LANDS NEEDED TO MEET COMMUNITY NEEDS

Secretary of the Interior James Watt announced today that he was asking Western Governors to identify small parcels of federally administered lands which local governments need to acquire to meet community needs for schools, hospitals, parks, or other public purposes.

"The Department of the Interior's land managers must be more responsive to community needs, especially in those Western States where much of the land is owned by the Federal Government," Watt said.

"One of my prime commitments as Secretary is my pledge to take into account the concerns and interests of the States as the Department makes its land management decisions," Secretary Watt said. "The action I am announcing today inviting the Governors, and through them counties and cities, to identify small parcels of federally administered land they want to acquire to meet community needs is an important step in honoring that commitment.

"When a town, a county or a State tells us of a need for land parcels owned by the Federal Government and it is determined that such a land transfer is in the public interest, the Department will move quickly to accomplish that transfer."

Citing the case of a high school in Tonopah, Nevada, that waited 13 years for the Interior Department to issue a patent for less than eight acres of public land, Watt said: "There is no excuse for such bureaucratic delay. The community of Tonopah simply wanted the Federal Government to turn over enough land to give the high school an athletic field."

The Recreation and Public Purposes Act and the Federal Land Policy and Management Act were cited by the Secretary as two mechanisms by which such land transfers may be made.

Secretary Watt said he does not intend to restrict applications to transfers which can be accomplished under existing authorities. "I am prepared to pursue vigorously legislative and regulatory changes, if necessary, to meet identified State and local needs," he said.

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Under the Recreation and Public Purposes Act, State governments and their political subdivisions, and nonprofit organizations, can acquire lands for specific public purposes, such as parks, schools, hospitals and libraries, either at no cost or for a nominal fee. The main requirement is a detailed plan for the project and a timetable for building it.

Sales under the Federal Land Policy and Management Act are a means of acquiring lands for community expansion. Under this Act, lands are sold at fair market value, and may be used for a variety of purposes at the discretion of the purchaser.

The new Interior Secretary said the identification and transfer of public land parcels for community needs will be a continuing priority and that he would welcome a response from the Governors on the immediate needs of their States within the next 60 days.

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