

Common ground emerges in trust-land debate

All those years of unsuccessful efforts at state-trust-land reform had a silver lining that is shining now.



ROBERT LEGER

The latest effort is expected to be introduced at the Legislature next week, with one big change. Groups that have squabbled over trust land are mostly supporting it this time.

“We’ve educated ourselves over the years.

We’ve gotten rid of the irrational fears,” State Land Commissioner Maria Baier said. “Negotiations have been more rational than in the past. Each of us has withdrawn demands that didn’t work for others.”

The result is two bills to be sponsored by Sen. John Nelson, R-Litchfield Park, who has fought previous trust-land-reform bills. They’ll have a familiar look.

» One would change state law on management of trust lands, Baier said during a panel discussion hosted by Valley Forward.

» The other would be a constitutional amendment on the fall ballot that would designate about 700,000 acres for preservation. Some of the land would be given to cities and the rest would be sold. This is good news for city-preserve efforts in Phoenix, Ca-

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refree and Cave Creek.

The ballot measure

would give the Land Department additional management tools, including the ability to develop master plans for large chunks of land. Specifics still were being negotiated this week.

“There’s lots of good reason to change the Constitution to allow for preservation. It’s the right thing to do,” said Spencer Kamps, lobbyist for the

Home Builders Association of Central Arizona, another former foe. “All we’re asking is pick the open space, tell us where we can build and let’s move on.”

The map, Kamps said, was a much less contentious issue this time. Debates of the past made it easier to designate preserve land.

Not every disagreement has been settled. Two big ones remained, Baier said: How is “conservation land” defined and what uses are allowed?

For Dave Richins of the Sonoran Institute, that’s easy.

“We’re trying to have it both ways,” he said. “We’re saying we want to preserve land, but we might let a power line or a road go through it. No. Let’s preserve the land.”

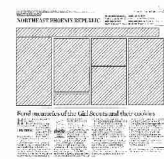
It’s a strong point, but just as strong is the argument from municipalities and utilities that an outright ban could cost millions of dollars if a power line had to be detoured around the most direct route.

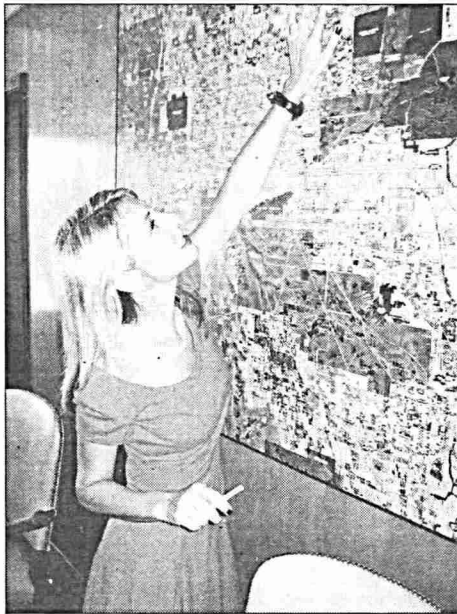
Baier would just as soon leave the issue off the ballot and out of the Constitution, instead authorizing the Legislature to determine acceptable uses. That’s a savvy way to hold together a diverse coalition that she said agrees on 85 percent of the issues.

Keeping those diverse groups together is the key. Trust-land reform has been elusive because the land serves so many purposes: money for education, raw material for homebuilders, key locations for commercial use, grazing for ranchers. Disagreement is easy.

Getting all these groups to agree on most issues is an accomplishment. But the real prize is winning a public vote that assures Arizona’s most spectacular lands are preserved for generations not yet born.

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Maria Baier is trying to keep together the many groups involved in trust-land issues.