

IN OUR VIEW

Conservation areas

Interior Secretary Ken Salazar visited Southern Utah on Monday to dedicate the Red Cliffs National Conservation Area and the Beaver Dam National Conservation Area. In both cases, Salazar and former Sen. Bob Bennett touted the way interested parties came together to hammer out an agreement that led to positive legislation.

The effort — officially known as the Washington County Growth and Conservation Act of 2009 but more commonly known as the “Washington County lands bill” — was years in the making. The effort started in the middle of the last decade, when growth in Washington County was fast-paced and, some would say, out of control.

Members of the Washington County Commission; then-Sen. Bennett, a Republican; and Rep. Jim Matheson, a Democrat, worked together to craft a bill that set aside thousands of acres for conservation and identified other parcels of land for development. It was a novel concept, people on both sides of the aisle working together to determine how best to plan for the future of the community.

The culmination was this week’s dedication ceremony that permanently sets aside parts of what is known as the Red Cliffs Desert Reserve as a conservation area. At the same

time, it allows for development in other areas by allowing for the transplantation of the desert tortoise and other endangered species. That effort has allowed for construction projects in other parts of the county.

As Salazar and Bennett stated Monday, the grass-roots effort is serving as a model for communities across the nation as they determine which lands they want to set aside and protect.

Make no mistake, preservation is important. By some estimates, about 130,000 people visited the Red Cliffs area in the 2011 fiscal year, generating \$9 million to \$11 million in revenue for the area. That’s definitely a good economic reason for protecting this unique parcel of land.

And by preserving this land, other land can be developed to help fuel the economy via construction and then businesses run on those sites.

This is the way conservation and wilderness designations should be decided, not by a declaration by a president or a government agency. People at the local level should have a say in what happens to the land. The Washington County lands bill, and Monday’s dedication ceremony, prove that such an effort can be successful.