Add a ‘Gateway Community Dividend’ to the PILT Program

Nearly 70 county commissioners, mayors, and council members from public land gateway communities in 11 western states sent a letter Oct. 21 to their congressional offices asking them to add a Gateway Community Dividend to the Payments in Lieu of Taxes program.

In 1976 Congress created the PILT program, which requires the federal government to make annual payments to local governments to compensate them for property taxes not collected on lands owned by the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, U.S. Forest Service and some military installations within their jurisdictions.

Congress generally funds PILT for only one year at a time, which makes budget planning difficult for counties because they don’t know how much the payments will be from year to year.

In 2019, counties across the country received more than $514 million in PILT payments. Based on estimates, a new Gateway Community Dividend would provide an additional $207 million annually to counties - funds that will help communities maintain critical infrastructure and provide essential services for both residents and visitors.

“Our beautiful protected public lands are tremendous assets to our communities and support our outdoor recreation economies. However, increased visitation and years of deferred maintenance on our public lands has strained the infrastructure that accommodates our visitors. These legislative changes would mean more consistent and predictable revenues for counties, and more support for more improvements and access to public lands and waters,” Supervisor Liz Archuleta, Chairwoman of the Board of Supervisors in Coconino County, Ariz. said.

The letter states: “To help gateway communities deal with additional costs, Congress should expand the PILT Program to include a ‘Gateway Community Dividend,’ which would add a 50 percent premium for every acre of permanently protected federal public lands to the current PILT formula. This dividend would be paid to counties with federally protected public lands within their jurisdiction, particularly lands that restrict extractive activity, such as wild and scenic rivers, wilderness areas, and national parks.”

“Our mountain communities have been hit hard by the economic downturn brought on by COVID-19. While some federal funding has been made available to state and local governments as part of the large spending package Congress passed earlier in the spring, our community will need help through this second wave and there are community members we can help if we continue to get support. A Gateway Community Dividend could help,” County Commissioner Jacob Greenberg, of Blaine County, Idaho said.

“PILT payments are a critical revenue source for local government budgets, funding vital services such as firefighting and police protection, public school and road construction, and search-and-rescue operations. A Gateway Community Dividend could really help communities like ours pay for the added infrastructure costs that comes with having well used, beautiful public lands in our county,” County Commissioner Tim Corrigan of Routt County, Colo. said.

LETTER SIGNERS

County Commissioner Lynn Ellins, Doña Ana County

Council Member Gabriel Vasquez, City of Las Cruces

Mayor Pro Tem Emeritus Gill M Sorg, City of Las Cruces

Council Member Yvonne Flores, City of Las Cruces

Mayor Linda Calhoun, Town of Red River

Council Member Renee Villarreal, City of Santa Fe

County Commissioner Anna Hansen, Santa Fe County

Council Member Darien Fernandez, Town of Taos

Council Member Nathaniel Evans, Town of Taos

all signed the letter as well as local government officials from Arizona, Colorado, California, Idaho, Montana, Oregon, Nevada, Utah, Washington State, and Wyoming.

Staff Reports