

Committee on Resources

Subcommittee on National Parks & Public Lands

Statement

**TESTIMONY OFFERED BY
MAYOR KEVIN J. PHILLIPS
CITY OF CALIENTE, NEVADA
LINCOLN COUNTY, NEVADA
IN SUPPORT OF H.R.2752,
THE LINCOLN LANDS IMPROVEMENT ACT
BEFORE THE U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
SUB-COMMITTEE ON NATIONAL PARKS AND PUBLIC LANDS
JULY 13, 2000**

MR. CHAIRMAN and members of the Committee, I am honored to be invited to appear before you today to offer testimony in favor of H.R 2752, the Lincoln Lands Improvement Act. My name is Kevin Phillips and I am Mayor of the City of Caliente, the only incorporated city in Lincoln County. The City of Caliente and the County of Lincoln work cooperatively and well on issues of mutual interest and concern. I am also a former President of the Lincoln County Board of School Trustees and wish to direct most of my remarks before this Committee to the significance of H.R.2752 upon the future of our county and it's communities in terms of our schools and the education of our children.

The Lincoln County School District provides a consistently high-quality education to approximately 1,000 children and youth of Lincoln County. The District has a long and well-established history of educational excellence and demonstrated student achievement. In addition to academic excellence, we are proud of the kids of our District for their consistent success in extracurricular activities as evidenced by award-winning arts programs and championship athletic teams.

The School District employs about 100 Lincoln County residents and is the largest single employer in Lincoln County. We operate two high schools, two middle schools and four elementary schools. In addition, the District also operates C.O. Bastian Middle and High School for students from throughout the State of Nevada who are incarcerated at the Caliente Youth Training Center.

The parents and communities of Lincoln County are tremendously supportive of our youth and of the schools they attend. Our schools along with our churches are, in the best sense, the primary focus of our communities.

But, our schools and our school district are in trouble, not for lack of local support or local determination for excellence, but because Lincoln County 's tax base is simply inadequate. In fact, Lincoln County 's tax base is insufficient to allow us to even perform our statutory responsibility under state law. Throughout our history, Lincoln County School District has struggled to just stay even with the costs of providing a quality public education to our students. In Nevada the State pays for the general operation and maintenance of schools while the county is responsible for providing safe, adequate and appropriate school facilities. Doing this is a difficult and perpetual challenge for us. We are bonded to our capacity and have no ability to bond further.

As you have been told by Commissioner Perkins, over 98% of the land in Lincoln County is publicly owned and therefore not subject to taxation. Please don ' t assume that federal Payments In Lieu of Taxes (PILT)

make up for this short-fall in our tax base. It doesn ' t. When one adds to the inadequate private property tax base a steadily declining assessed valuation and aging, and steadily deteriorating school facilities, one begins to understand the depth of our problem and the seriousness of our dilemma. We are, with the current and existing tax base, simply unable to provide safe and adequate schools for our kids.

The Pioche Elementary School building is 94 years old. This venerable old building has the distinction of being the oldest continually used school in Nevada. However, it ' s foundation is failing and it has been declared unsafe for use. Our seven other school buildings range in age from 87 years old to 6 years old. Removing the oldest and newest buildings from the list, the average age of our school facilities is over 65 years. The costs of operating such aging buildings was shockingly clarified to residents and Board of Trustee members with two recent incidents.

First, we received some state grant money to improve our District educational technology efforts. Unfortunately, before we could install a single computer, it cost us nearly \$500,000 simply to upgrade the electrical capacity of our buildings just to handle the load requirements of installing one computer per classroom through the District.

Secondly, and more seriously, in April, 1999, three of our schools were inspected by two separate independent architectural engineering firms and were found to pose a potential serious life-safety threat to (their) occupants. Those occupants are, of course, our kids, their teachers and support staff.

Fortunately for our students, the Nevada Legislature with the strong support of Governor Kenny Guinn, approved \$7.9 million for the Lincoln County School District to build a new elementary school in Pioche and a new high school in Panaca.

While this gracious and responsible action on the part of the Governor and legislature will allow us to deal with our most immediate and pressing needs, it will only serve to keep the wolf away from the door temporarily. It does not address our long-term problem. We need additional tax base.

We desperately need congressional approval of the Lincoln Lands Improvement Act. The transfer of publicly held lands near Mesquite, Nevada to private ownership will provide a seriously needed resource with which we can begin to resolve our educational facilities problem.

The Lincoln Lands Improvement Act will double the amount of taxable property in Lincoln County and will thereby increase significantly our bonding capacity. It will allow us to systematically proceed to solve our own problems.

This is all we ask.

Thank you again, Mr. Chairman, for the opportunity to present our concerns to this Committee. On behalf of the kids of Lincoln County and their parents and their teachers I urge your support of this legislation that is so vital to our county, school district and our communities.

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