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Opinion: Colorado's gateways to public lands need help from Congress

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Like many parts of the country, Chaffee County has been hit hard by the economic downturn brought on by COVID-19.

The spring is a busy time here as an influx of tourism and visitation to our incredible public lands buoy our economy as well as the county's budget, but we're missing out on much of that revenue right now.

While federal funding has been made available to state and local governments as part of the large spending package passed by Congress earlier in the spring, and that is important, this is also a good opportunity to think bigger about our county's budget and the funding streams that support it.



Chaffee County Commissioner Keith Baker

A little-known policy called the Payments in Lieu of Taxes, or PILT Program, was created by Congress to financially help counties offset

losses in property taxes and compensate rural counties for the tax-exempt federally owned public land within their borders.

These federal payments help local governments carry out such vital services as firefighting and police protection, construction of public schools and roads and search-and-rescue operations.

The payments are made annually for tax-exempt federal lands administered by the Bureau of Land Management, the National Park Service, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (all bureaus of the Department of the Interior) and the U.S. Forest Service (part of the U.S. Department of Agriculture) and for federal water projects and some military installations.

These public lands are tremendous assets to our community and help drive a significant part of our economy, especially protected public lands like Collegiate Peaks Wilderness, Buffalo Peaks Wilderness and Browns Canyon National Monument.

However, the increased visitation our county sees as a result of our protected public lands puts a strain on our infrastructure. To help gateway communities like ours deal with those costs, Congress should expand PILT to include a “Gateway Community Dividend,” which would allocate additional resources to counties like ours that have protected public lands and see increased visitation as a result.

An additional benefit of the Gateway Community Dividend would be to incentivize the protection of public lands in our and other counties across the West.

Here in Chaffee County, we know the tremendous benefits protected public lands have for our community and especially our wildlife. Recent studies have shown that up to [1 million species of wildlife are at risk of extinction](#) due to habitat loss, climate change and other factors. One of the most important ways we can prevent the loss of more species is to protect their habitat.

Although PILT is permanently authorized, Congress has generally funded it for only one year at a time. The lack of consistent, guaranteed funding makes payments unpredictable and long-term budget planning difficult.

PILT should be expanded to compensate counties for the benefits that protected lands provide the country as well as the costs, particularly in gateway communities that require extra infrastructure and services to support tourism and outdoor recreation.

The current PILT formula unfortunately tips the scale toward shortsighted decisions — such as drilling and mining activities — that may generate immediate revenue but are bad for the long-term health and resilience of local communities.

Simple improvements to the PILT program to add a “Gateway Community Dividend” for counties could quickly drive more money to counties, support more locally driven protections of public lands and waters and provide more stable revenues during recessions.

The Gateway Community Dividend would add a 50% premium for every acre of permanently protected public lands to the current PILT formula.

This would provide additional payments to counties that have protected public lands within their jurisdiction, particularly those lands that restrict extractive activity, such as wild and scenic, wilderness areas and national parks.

In 2019, counties across the country received more than \$514 million in PILT payments. Estimates tell us adding a Gateway Community Dividend would immediately drive an additional \$207 million to counties annually. Furthermore, Colorado would see an addition \$7.5 million a year with 82% of those funds directed toward rural counties, and \$135,660 for our county.

Adding a Gateway Community Dividend to the PILT program would be a big step in the right direction, supporting our public lands and rural communities when we need it the most.

I urge Congress and Colorado’s congressional delegation to take a hard look at this idea and the benefits it would provide to communities like ours.

Keith Baker is a Chaffee County County Commissioner. He is also a retired U.S. Navy Commander.