

Land Control Is Issue

CONTROVERSIES that led to the resignation of Secretary of the Interior James Watt involve a basic issue that reaches down to local differences concerning housing developments and zoning laws.

That is: Who shall decide what may be done with the land? The scale of battle is vastly different but the disagreement is over whether that decision shall rest in the hands of government or be made by those who own the land.

In southwest Oklahoma City, homeowners are opposing rezoning certain property for a mobile home development. Residents of an exclusive Norman neighborhood object to a proposed low-income housing project. Nearby homeowners have filed suit to block an apartment complex on land adjacent to Shepherd Mall.

Environmental groups that ridiculed James Watt's casual remarks may not have been particularly concerned about what he said. Their aim was to obstruct a land-management policy that would permit utilization of needed resources on federal property.

Public lands administered by the Department of Interior contain an estimated 40 percent of the undeveloped crude oil and natural gas in the United States, plus 35 percent of the coal and 80 percent of the tar sands, uranium, nickel and other minerals.

Administration policy is to develop and utilize these critical resources, while protecting national parks and recreational areas

and scenic vistas. Critics want more federal lands reserved for parks, camping, hiking and wildlife, with more federal control.

Our government is not short on land. The federal government owns 34 percent of all land, with states, counties, cities and other local units holding another 6 percent.

During the 1970s, several efforts were made to push land-use planning through Congress, whereby land usage might be determined in Washington over private property. None passed, so sponsors turned to other tactics aimed at the same result.

Four years ago, private landowners in Lincoln County, Osage County and the Oklahoma Panhandle successfully resisted federal plans to take part of their land for game and wildlife refuges. Afterward, the Legislature enacted a law to prevent the federal government from acquiring Oklahoma land without local consent.

Unquestionably, certain properties are needed for the public well-being, but the drive to extend federal control over more private property and to prevent needed utilization of public lands does not seem to be in the best interests of the majority of citizens.

Insofar as possible, land should be in private hands and owners should be allowed to use their lands responsibly, as long as their purposes do not encroach upon and depreciate the value or usefulness of neighboring properties.