

Meadows ski trail approved despite flurry of protests

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by Raelynn Gill

The approval of a new Mt. Hood Meadows cross country ski trail has brought a flurry of protests from the Hood River Valley Residents Committee.

However, that opposition has so far failed to stop Mt. Hood Meadows North, LLC , from gaining a conditional use permit for the project. Both the Hood River County Planning Department and Planning Commission have approved the trail on private lands Meadows purchased south of Parkdale last year.

At issue is whether a commercial Nordic ski trail over a two and one-half mile stretch of old logging roads on the Cooper Spur Inn holdings is an allowable and appropriate use of a forest zone.

"It is disappointing that the Hood River Valley Residents Committee has chosen to oppose something as minor as this. I think it demonstrates that they have become somewhat detached from the recreational component to this community," said Dave Riley, vice-president and general manager of Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort, the parent company.

"Recreation is not only important for our economy but it's an important part of our lifestyle, and this proposal demonstrates that can be done in a way that is in harmony with the environment," he said.

But the Hood River land-use watchdog group contends that Meadows is developing in stages the destination it has been planning for more than 20 years. They believe that development will bring severe environmental and watershed damage to the pristine wilderness area.

"The planning committee apparently wants to deal with Meadows' operations in a piecemeal fashion when they need to look at the master plan as whole," said George Earley of Parkdale.

In fact, the residents committee formed, in part, just to wage a fight against proposals by Meadows in the 1970s and '80s that were ultimately shot down at the state level. That long-standing contention led Gehrman of Parkdale to remind planning commissioners at Wednesday's appeal hearing that the new application centered on use of private property, not land Meadows leased from the U.S. Forest Service.

"This might not be politically correct but I believe if we were not talking about Mt. Hood Meadows we wouldn't be standing here tonight," said Gehrman.

The planning commission tried to stop any speculation about future use of the Cooper Spur Inn property during testimony. Chair Bill Lyons told the 48 audience members that county codes mandated the ski trail be evaluated on its own merits and not as part of a project that had not yet been put on the table. In spite of that admonition, several residents called for Meadows to play its hand about future resort plans.

They also expressed concerns about increased traffic, a greater influx of people being drawn to the area by a visit and then deciding to settle there – which would threaten the environmental health of the forest and agricultural properties. Two residents said without proper planning the north side of Mt. Hood could someday resemble a “Disneyland”.

However, Commissioner Stanley Benson told a Portland owner of one Mt. Shadows cabin site that by building a part-time home there he had probably “disrupted” the forest more than skiers using a cross country trail for 16 weeks out of the year.

“Several times we’ve heard this argument about ‘commercial creep’ but arguments about future development are irrelevant and should be made when that day comes, if it comes,” said Benson.

After extensive study, county planners determined that Meadows’ 153 acres tract was located in an area already known for winter recreational activities, making the cross country trail a compatible use. They also determined that under both county and state land-use codes that cross-country skiing would be similar to “private hunting or fishing commercial operations without lodging” and bring minimal damage to vegetation.

That staff decision was also based, in part, on the fact that after surrounding property holders were notified about Meadows plan, none submitted oral or written protests. In addition, the county, state and federal forest regulatory agencies with ownership in the vicinity all agreed that human movement in the forest area during the colder months would not bring fire hazard or adversely affect surrounding public lands because it would take place on a deep snow layer.

To ensure protection of both the forest and neighboring properties, planners recommended 22 conditions be tied to the project’s approval. These included posting of signs to keep skiers on groomed trails and disallowing biking, hiking, horseback riding, snowmobiling and hunting without issuance of another conditional use permit.

Testimony at the Feb. 13 hearing was evenly split pro and con over the Meadows ski trail and the planning commission voted unanimously in favor of the staff approval. They added one more environmental protection by prohibiting Meadows from using salt or chemicals on snow over the groomed trail.

Once the formal findings of that decision have been made public, the Hood River Valley Residents Committee will have 15 days to file another appeal, which will then go before the County Commission for review.