

Residents gear up for showdown

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By RaeLynn Gill

The Hood River Valley Residents Committee gathered in Toll Bridge Park on a hot Sunday afternoon for a 25th anniversary celebration.

There was a sense of déjà vu among many of the 40 people in attendance at the annual meeting. The land-use watchdog group had formed, in part, to battle against two prior development proposals by Mt. Hood Meadows, Ltd., in the 1970s and '80s — and they were gearing up for a third showdown.

In fact, the HRVRC financial report submitted by President Ken Maddox showed that almost \$9,000 of the \$15,054 income during the past year had already been spent to fight the expected Meadows proposal. These costs include the current litigation filed against the county's forest land exchange with Meadows that netted the company 640 acres next to its new Cooper Spur Inn holdings.

That trade, finalized in March, also gained the county more than 140 acres of forest land and, with a \$1 million value differential payment, more than double the board feet of marketable timber.

In spite of two recent dismissals of his request for court scrutiny of that deal, Ralph Bloemers, HRVRC attorney, told the gathering he was confident that his firm would prevail in a pending backup lawsuit. Bloemers, who works for the Cascade Resources Advocacy Group, a public interest law firm based in Portland, said too much media attention had been given to the technicalities of that case and not its merits, which he hoped would someday be aired in the courtroom.

The HRVRC is arguing that the county violated the public interest with the exchange. They claim that the appraisal of timberland did not factor in Meadows' publicly stated intent to build a destination resort.

The county and Meadows contend that state law requires appraisals of forest land to be based on the "highest and best" existing use and not on speculation over a development proposal that has not even been submitted.

The possibility that an official application might soon be laid on the table came closer to reality last week when Meadows requested that the county map sites eligible for placement of a destination resort.

The company has agreed to pay the \$8,300 cost of the study that will determine whether all or part of Meadows' private land in the vicinity of Cooper Spur meets the criteria of the state's Goal 8 land-use planning laws.

At the July 21 meeting, Mike Benedict, county planning director, informed the HRVRC members that the county's mapping consultants, Cogan, Owens, Cogan of Portland, had been informed that if they had any contact with Meadows during the process they would be fired. He said the draft maps and the accompanying ordinance setting out criteria for a destination resort would be presented to the public at a future hearing.

Under the county comprehensive land-use regulations and in its Economic Development Action Plan, destination resorts are allowed with a conditional use permit if a location is determined to be suitable.

Benedict said if the Meadows' property failed to qualify under the Goal 8 regulations, the company could still apply under the Goal 2 exception process, which is much more complex but less restrictive if granted.

He asked Carrie Kuerschner MacLaren, representative from the 1000 Friends of Oregon, what position that environmental protection group would take on a destination resort application since it had co-negotiated the current state law allowing these developments on some resource lands.

MacLaren said that it was premature to answer that question, since her organization had not seen the actual plans and what they entailed.

Also discussed at the meeting was the pending Wal-Mart application for a Supercenter on 16 commercially zoned acres at the junction of Frankton and Country Club roads.

Peter Frothingham, representing the Citizens for Responsible Growth, said the newly formed group was determined to give "Wal-Mart a run for its money" during upcoming public hearings. He said the CRG membership had been working for weeks to dissect the criteria involved with that site plan.

Frothingham said compiled data showed that the application failed on several grounds, including compatibility, resource protection and traffic. He said CRG had taken the stand that any approval of the application would violate the county zoning regulations and would be open to legal challenge.