

Cooper Spur Coalition spars with Mt. Hood Meadows

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By RaeLynn Gill

Mt. Hood Meadows, Ltd., wants to hire a professional mediator to resolve long-standing differences with the Hood River Valley Residents Committee.

"A successful collaborative dispute resolution process is a win-win for all parties," said Dave Riley, Meadows general manager.

However, Mike McCarthy, HRVRC member, said the group has asked Riley to put Meadows' development plans on the table and explain the company's "vision" for the mountain before they will accept that offer.

"We would be very interested in proceeding ahead then," said McCarthy.

Since Riley's offer in June the HRVRC has been instrumental in forming the Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition. The new CSWFC is comprised of representatives from environmental and recreation organizations and dedicated to blocking any development that would "destroy the last remaining wilderness area" on Mt. Hood.

"They need to remember that Cooper Spur Mountain Resort includes 775 acres of private land, and they cannot confuse that with the public land," said Riley. "They are continually misstating that our permit area and private land is a wilderness, when that classification has not been given to either of those properties."

The formation of the new land-use watchdog group parallels Meadows' formal request in July that the county map sites eligible for a destination resort within its borders. The review, expected to be completed within the next two months, will determine whether all or part of Meadows private land in the vicinity of Cooper Spur meets the state criteria for the development.

Also included on the CSWFC steering committee are representatives from: Friends of Mt. Hood, Mazamas, Oregon Nordic Club, Sierra Club, Oregon Natural Resources Council, Oregon Wildlife Federation, and the Northwest Environmental Defense Center, Friends of Tilly Jane, and BARK (a network of volunteers dedicated to protecting Oregon's public forests).

"The HRVRC has opposed everything we've done for decades, a cost of time, energy and goodwill for everyone," said Riley.

The HRVRC was established in 1977 to protect farm and forestlands within the county. It successfully led the battle against a previous Meadows' proposal for a destination resort in the early 80s.

As Meadows' lays the groundwork for another development proposal, Riley would like to establish a process to:

- Improve relations between the two groups.
- Establish long-term certainty about development size and scale at Meadows, the private property surrounding the Inn at Cooper Spur related to that ski area.
- Jointly gain better control of respective interests on and around Mt. Hood.

As one option for guiding the proposed dispute resolution process, Riley suggested that the HRVRC consider guidelines in a text produced by the state of Oregon, "Collaborative Approaches: A Handbook for Public Policy Decision-Making and Conflict Resolution."

"Talking things out, sharing information and reaching agreements is the responsible approach to problem solving," he said.

Riley said the mediation process could also address HRVRC's publicly stated concerns about the dimensions of the project and its effect on the environment.

He said shared information "creates long-term certainty as to the types of uses and limits of development."

In a published position statement, the CSWFC opposes expansion or construction of commercial enterprises on the mountain, favoring natural recreation opportunities.

"Specifically, we believe wide sectors of the public should benefit from public property, and that Mt. Hood should be noncommercial wherever possible," outlines the non-profit group.

Riley agrees that the public should benefit from outdoor activities on the mountain but said the U.S. Forest Service reiterated this week the importance of private/public partnerships. He said the Memorandum of Understanding signed between the U.S. Department of Agriculture and the National Ski Areas Association clearly outlines the logic behind having private businesses manage and develop ski areas and not have taxpayers incur that expense.

"Last year our two ski areas hosted over 413,000 people who came to enjoy their National Forest – which means we obviously have a large number of people who want the services we are providing on the public land," said Riley.

To ensure that public use did not adversely affect the natural resources on Mt. Hood, Riley said Meadows invited the HRVRC to participate in discussions this summer about how the company could support ecologic, economic and social sustainability as a member of the Oregon Natural Step Network. But McCarthy said the HRVRC does not want to become involved in that process until they are reassured that it is not just a public relations ploy.

"The first thing we want to do is to see if there is any substance to the program before we get involved," McCarthy said.

Riley said McCarthy and the HRVRC do not seem to understand that mediation is not about controlling discussions but about working out a plan that is acceptable to all parties.

"I'm terribly disappointed that they are not willing to put their positions aside so we can explore mutually acceptable alternatives. That's what problem solving is all about – this makes me think they don't really want to solve the dispute," he said.