

County planners review resort zoning concerns

Planning officials ponder resort map, but no new testimony accepted

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By RaeLynn Gill

After hearing more than 10 hours of public testimony, the Hood River Planning Commission is ready to pinpoint concerns about the draft destination resort map on Wednesday.

Since the appointed body will meet in a work session, Planning Director Mike Benedict said no public testimony will be taken. For that reason, he said the Commission will convene at 7:30 p.m. in its regular meeting place on the third floor of the county courthouse and not in a facility that will accommodate a large audience.

"This should be a short meeting since it is strictly an opportunity for the planning commission to ask staff for more data about how things were put together," said Benedict.

He said since the third public hearing on Feb. 5, the commission has been reviewing hundreds of pages of submitted documents to compile a list of questions. Once these outstanding issues have been addressed, the seven-member panel will make a recommendation on the map and its accompanying ordinance that will be forwarded to the Hood River County Commission for review and further public comment.

A controversy has arisen over the inclusion on the map of about 70 acres of property in the southern sector of the county that is owned by Mt. Hood Meadows, Ltd. The Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition has formed to fight against the company's stated intent to build a destination resort that it claims would harm natural resources and encourage over-use by recreationists. In turn, the Friends of Cooper Spur Mountain Resort has formed to answer that challenge by advocating for a development that would bring needed jobs to the economically-depressed county.

Although a minimum of 160 acres is necessary to build a resort under Goal 8 of state land-use laws, Meadows contends that about 200 acres of its property should actually be included on the draft map. The company argues that consultants Cogans, Owens, Cogan drew a three-mile buffer zone around nearby farms that did not meet state income guidelines for that protection. If Meadows is not successful in its bid to change those boundaries, the firm could still seek to build a resort under the more arduous Goal 2 exception process to convert a forest zone for commercial use. Planning Commission Chair Bill Lyons said that even if a final map meeting Goal 8 state land-use rules is approved, it does not mean that a destination resort can automatically be sited on one of the eligible properties.

Under the county's comprehensive land-use plan for forest zones, Lyons said a resort is listed as a conditional use and not permitted outright.

In addition, he said the land-use plan also requires resort applicants to pay into a special fund that can be used to hire independent consultants. For example, he said the county could choose to bring in wildlife or hydrogeologist experts if necessary to address any outstanding issues.