

Opposing camps seek compromise in resort battle

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After losing three rounds in court, the opponents of a disputed land trade are seeking an alternative to further legal action.

"To be clear, our clients are not making an offer to settle but only communicating their willingness to talk," wrote Ralph Bloemers, attorney for the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, in a July 7 letter to Mt. Hood Meadows and Hood River County.

However, Meadows believes the conversation with HRVRC should include its plans for construction of a destination resort.

"We are interested in collaboration that deals with the entire Cooper Spur expansion, including both the ski area and the private land because, alternatively, it's difficult for parties to come together to resolve part of a dispute knowing they will be in court over the remainder if it's not all settled at once," said Dave Riley, Meadows general manager.

But Mike McCarthy, HRVRC spokesperson, said the group only wants to talk about the future of the 640 acres that Meadows received from the county. He said Meadows has already publicly stated that it doesn't plan to build a resort on that property so there is no need to address that issue.

"We're interested in the future of the land trade and also protecting the watershed and those are the discussions we would have with Mt. Hood Meadows," said McCarthy.

Instead of pursuing an appeal to Circuit Court Judge Donald Hull's final dismissal of its case in May, the HRVRC is looking at two options to resolve the dispute. These include having the county buy back the forest land it exchanged for 785 acres owned by Meadows. The second alternative is for Meadows or the HRVRC to arrange for a conservation group to buy the property.

"Our clients have already begun the process of gathering information on suitable conservation buyers. Based on some initial inquiries, our clients believe there is a very real potential to close this type of deal," wrote Bloemers.

The former county land under debate adjoins the 160 acres of Cooper Spur Inn holdings purchased by Meadows in 2001. Because the company had publicly stated an intent to build a destination resort in that area, the HRVRC legally challenged the market value assigned to the property since it did not factor in that future use. The county and Meadows argued that state law required appraisals of forest land to be based on the "highest and best" existing use and not on speculation.

Several times during legal proceedings within the past year, Riley said he offered to hire a professional mediator so Meadows and the HRVRC could resolve long-standing differences. Last fall, the land-use watchdog group said they would consider that solution if Meadows' laid its development plans on the table first and explained its "vision" for the mountain.