

KOIN.COM

Controversial Expansion Plans Scaled Back

April 30, 2004

MOUNT HOOD, Ore. -- A controversial plan to develop a ski resort and golf course on the northeastern flank of Mount Hood could be scaled back, according to plans under discussion by Hood River residents and Mt. Hood Meadows ski resort officials.

In exchange, though, Meadows would get two smaller properties near Government Camp, on 120 acres of U.S. Forest Service land that is already zoned for residential use.

The proposal is the newest twist in years of debate over the future of the Cooper Spur area. Residents have taken the fight against development to the ballot box and the courthouse, saying large-scale development could contaminate water used for drinking and irrigation.

Despite an agreement to open mediated talks, the sides are still far apart on their visions for Cooper Spur.

Meadows still could develop another 175 acres it owns near Cooper Spur even if a trade goes through, although plans for a golf course would be dropped. And the company would gain rights to build a master-planned residential community in Government Camp.

Any development is a long way off. A land swap with the Forest Service takes a minimum of 18 months to be approved at the highest levels in Washington, D.C. Then, development plans for both Cooper Spur and Government Camp must go through the multilayered approval processes in Hood River and Clackamas counties, respectively.

Originally, Meadows wanted to turn the small Cooper Spur ski area into a year-round destination with as many as 450 hotel rooms, condominiums, homes, restaurants, an ice rink and an 18-hole golf course.

Environmentalists, outdoor groups and many Hood River Valley residents objected, saying the development would destroy a heavily timbered area threaded with back-country ski and hiking trails, a favorite of mountain climbers and home to diverse wildlife.

Activists sued Hood River County and Meadows over an original land trade between them that gave the ski company 620 acres near Cooper Spur. That court case is on appeal.

And last November, Hood River County voters passed a measure that gave voters final approval on residential developments greater than 25 units in a forest zone. Earlier this month, the Oregon Land Use Board of Appeals took written briefs and testimony on a challenge to the measure by a landowners and development group. The board's decision is pending.

Ken Maddox, president of the Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition, said Meadows' latest proposal is disingenuous on its face because the ski area proposes to "have one's cake and eat it

too." He said the last plans he saw still included the residences, retail shops, recreation facility and hotel, all on the smaller parcel.

Mike McCarthy, a board member of the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, said his group is interested in talking despite its reservations. But, he said, they want a promise that there would be no destination resort.

Dave Riley, vice president and general manager of Mount Hood Meadows, said he's looking to build consensus and hopes the activist groups participate in the discussion.

He called the land-trade idea a winner for all involved because it protects the valley's watershed by putting it back into public ownership, while still leaving some room for expansion at Cooper Spur.