

OREGON PUBLIC BROADCASTING

Concerns Over Possible Expansion at Mt. Hood Meadows

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PORTLAND, OR -- The 15-year master plan for Mount Hood Meadows calls for two new chair lifts at new locations, the replacement and upgrade of five existing chair lifts, a large mountain restaurant, several day lodges at the base area, and about eight acres of new parking. Notable by its absence, however, is a lodge where skiers can stay overnight on the mountain. Doug Jones is the Permit Administrator with the Mount Hood National Forest, and has been negotiating the master plan.

Jones: We did not allow Mount Hood Meadows to have overnight housing up at the big ski area. Consequently, they have a need for housing to get people to stay for a whole weekend and that sort of thing. If they do something down at Cooper's Spur, then they could have hotels or condos or whatever there.

Just 12 miles down the mountain, the Cooper Spur Restaurant, inn and lodges aren't exactly five star accommodations. But they are grand-fathered into land use laws. They're also close to the Cooper Spur ski area--a 1,400-acre swath of land, only 50 acres of which have ever been developed.

Currently there's a T-bar ski lift there, a rope tow and a little day lodge. Dave Riley of Mount Hood Meadows says the resort hopes to replace the T-bar with a new chair lift next summer and bring in a new power line, because the old one is unreliable. He says Mount Hood Meadows officials would also like to put in a "wonder carpet"--a moving conveyor belt lift--to help young kids get up the slope easily, as well as expand nordic skiing and snow-shoeing. But Riley says, Cooper's Spur will remain small and family focused.

Riley: We don't intend to build another Mount Hood Meadows by any means on the north side of Mount Hood and compete with ourselves. What our vision is for a smaller, less expensive, more intimate type of ski area that families continue to feel comfortable and enjoy.

Adjacent to the Cooper Spur ski area, but off of Forest Service land, Mount Hood Meadows is about to secure 640 acres of private forest land by swapping some of its land with Hood River County. And it's this swap, that has locals buzzing. It's no good for skiing; it's too flat. But it would be picture perfect for a destination resort, a full scale lodge and perhaps even a golf course. Forest Service spokesman, Doug Jones, says since it's private land the agency doesn't have any jurisdiction over what's developed there. But he says officials will be keeping a close eye on what happens.

Jones: Whatever they do there, I'm sure there'll be some connection between the ski area on National Forest land and the resort of whatever it might be on private land.

What it might be, has been the subject of great speculation. And Hood Meadow's Dave Riley isn't dropping any hints about a possible new resort or anything else.

Riley: You know it's too early to say for sure. What we're doing right now is just evaluating the area and doing some studies and looking at the resources and things like that. We just aren't in a position right now to say that is what we propose. It's a possibility, I wouldn't rule it in. But we certainly haven't announced anything like that at this time and we're not prepared to.

Of course, locals point out that even Hood Meadows isn't rich enough to buy up ski areas, lodges and forest land, to then simply ponder what to do with them. Kate McCarthy for one, says such "double-speak" is typical of ski area management. McCarthy has a 30 year history of battling Mount Hood Meadows and supports a lawsuit that is challenging the area's master plan. Parts of that suit have been dismissed by a judge, but other parts, involving the ski area's breaching of the Clean Water Act, have to be settled by the company. Opening a battered three-ring binder, McCarthy points to picture of Hood Meadows in the summer, when the ground is not obscured by a blanket of white snow. There are muddy scars down the mountain and trees that have been stripped of their bark because they've been pelted with snow containing gravel from the parking lot snow blower. The pictures are old, but McCarthy says they're indicative of Meadows' attitude toward the environment.

McCarthy: The extent to which they've destroyed this area, and then to have them turned loose on 640 more acres is a concern because they don't have any respect for the land. They think they do.

She says the land swap, located in the Crystal Springs watershed, is an important wild life corridor for deer, elk and bears. She says Meadows has tried to put up ecologically sound erosion barriers for its construction in the past, but the extreme chinook winds on the mountain, and the massive spring snow melt, defy traditional erosion prevention measures.

McCarthy: They shouldn't be messing around with it that much. They try, but it just doesn't work. But they keep on doing more. They're aren't on top of the problems they've got and that's why we oppose a lot of the expansion.

There have been problems, says Doug Jones of the Mount Hood National Forest. But, he maintains, they're in the past:

Jones: Most recently, in the last five to six years there were a couple of minor violations, where lift towers were placed in wetlands and the ski area and the Forest Service made a mistake there and we owned up to that, the ski area owned up to that and they're making restitution here in the valley.

Jones says the ski area now goes above and beyond what's required. Meadows' spokesman, Dave Riley, agrees:

Riley: We're a heck of a lot more sensitive and we go the extra mile, not only with day to day management, but with how we propose projects, how we construct projects, how we locate projects.... it's a completely different day and a completely different world that we live in. I'm quite proud of our environmental track record.

Whatever Meadows plans to do at the location of the 640-acre land swap, the company will have to go through the regular planning process with Hood River County. Commissioner Carole York says the county has yet to hear anything concrete.

York: There's been talk that there's been some proposals for additional development. I haven't seen any information about what they might be thinking about doing..... If Meadows is planning on doing something else, they'll have to go through the whole land use process which won't be a quick decision because it is forest land so they'll have to go through our county planning department.

York says members of the Hood River County Planning Department staff are currently up to their ears in controversial new developments. In addition to Coopers Spur, there's also a plan to build what's called a Super WalMart and the Warm Springs Indian Tribe wants to build a casino. York says the county needs the jobs, but also doesn't want to become the next yuppie location and lose its agricultural economic base.