

THE OREGONIAN

Ski resort plans put county on the spot

January 27, 2003

By Alex Pulaski

HOOD RIVER -- With timber all but dead and tree fruits waning, Hood River County officials are casting their eyes south to their inescapable neighbor, Mount Hood.

Whether Oregon's tallest peak can help rescue them from near double-digit unemployment -- and what residents would have to surrender in the process -- remains unclear. But a battle over tourism's place in the new Oregon economy, embodied in a potential golf and ski resort, is about to be fought over the mountain's northern flank.

Last week, more than 200 people packed a meeting at which county officials began publicly weighing planning rules for a large-scale development on Mount Hood. The standards are a prelude to consideration of a proposal they expect from the owners of Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort. Meadows officials say the resort would generate from \$100 million to \$200 million in construction during the next two decades, creating tax revenue and 200 permanent jobs in Hood River County.

In the past two years, Meadows has bought the quaint Cooper Spur ski area near Parkdale, engineered a land swap with the county that's already been challenged in court and approached the federal government about trading land with the U.S. Forest Service. Meadows says its plans are not final. But resort representatives have talked with area residents about concepts including as many as 450 homes, hotel rooms and condominiums, an ice-skating rink, stores and restaurants.

The prospect of planting a destination resort on Mount Hood's slopes has sent tremors into the Hood River Valley and beyond. "I don't think there's been a more controversial issue in the 30 years I've lived here," said Rodger Schock, who took over as chairman of the county Board of Commissioners earlier this month.

Hood River County's unemployment rate sits at 9.4 percent -- fifth-worst in Oregon, the state burdened by the highest such rates in the country. With the timber industry almost nonexistent and fruit farmers struggling on international markets, Schock termed the county's need for economic growth and jobs "dire."

But in a planning process that all of the participants call abstract and complicated, Schock says the ultimate decision comes down to addressing two questions: "Is it legal? Does it make good sense?" he said. "Because if we try to make this decision based on economic opportunity alone, then I believe we've prostituted the land-use laws we've spent years to put in place."

At the county level, the Board of Commissioners will have the ultimate word on planning a Mount Hood resort. Any decision would likely face legal challenges.

For the next few weeks the process rests in the hands of county planning commissioners. They began taking testimony last week, and public interest was so high that dozens of people had to be turned away from a hotel meeting room that seats 250 people.

Statewide interest Although the county is making the decisions, Mount Hood's status as an Oregon icon has drawn interest from climbers, skiers, hikers and outdoors enthusiasts from all over the state. Supporters and opponents bused and carpooled in from the Portland area. Public hearings will continue this week.

The task before the planning commission is to recommend rules and define areas in which a destination resort would be allowed. Arcane rules and interpretations of words hold huge implications, just as a judge's instructions and evidence allowed affect a jury verdict.

The county hired a Portland planning firm, Cogan Owens Cogan, to map the area and propose rules. "This is a complicated project," the firm's Jim Owens told planning commissioners last week. "It really boils down to definitions."

Among the most significant is what constitutes a commercial farm. Under state law, a destination resort cannot be within three miles of a high-value crop area. State rules further define such areas as having soils that can produce crops worth at least \$1,000 an acre annually and being within an area "with a concentration of commercial farms."

From that, along with federal farm maps, state agricultural income data and other information, Owens' firm suggested that a commercial farm be at least 20 acres if planted in fruit or Christmas trees and at least 35 acres if in pasture or hay.

At the hearing, representatives of Mt. Hood Meadows largely supported the Owens firm's conclusions. Dave Riley, Meadows' general manager, argued that income from Christmas trees and hay in the area were low enough that Christmas tree farms should not be considered at all, and farms planted in pasture should be significantly larger than 35 acres to be considered commercially viable.

Under the scenario most favorable to development, about 200 acres of the 775 acres Meadows owns would fit outside the three-mile zone from high-value cropland. The more broadly a commercial farm is defined, the less Meadows land would be available for development. In other words, the more farms that are recognized, the fewer ski chalets could be built.

Mike McCarthy, a Parkdale pear grower and one of the chief opponents of the resort proposal, said it appeared that the farm definitions were being drawn in ways most favorable to developing. In particular, he questioned why some of his family's property had been left off maps.

Both Owens and Mike Benedict, the county's director of planning and community development, said their suggestions had been drawn without direct input from either Meadows or opponents.

Another significant point, however, turned after Meadows weighed in. Federal land debate In a draft, the consultants and county staff had originally recommended that resort area planning not include federal lands. But Riley wrote the county Jan. 1 to urge that federal land be included. That way, he wrote, if federal land later came into private hands an applicant would not have to wait years to go through another planning process.

A Forest Service representative, lands specialist Doug Jones, also contacted the county about the same time. Jones wrote Benedict on Dec. 31 to say that the county "may wish to retain some flexibility" by including land from the Mount Hood National Forest in planning. Like Riley, Jones suggested that the sole purpose was in case the government later decided to trade land with a private party.

Jones and other forest representatives met once with Riley in recent weeks, at Riley's behest, to discuss the possibility of a swap. Jones and Riley said they had conceptually discussed Meadows' obtaining a few hundred acres between the Cooper Spur Lodge and the leased federal lands on which ski runs are located.

In exchange, Meadows could offer the 620 acres of private forestland it obtained in the 2001 swap with Hood River County.

But Jones said he doubted whether such a federal-private exchange could transpire, both from the controversy it would generate and because a compelling public benefit would have to be demonstrated to make it happen.

The county-Meadows swap is already tangled in legal challenges by a citizens committee. A lawsuit contends that the county undervalued the land it traded to Mt. Hood Meadows by classifying it as timberland -- worth \$325 an acre -- rather than as a resort destination. In testimony last week, Riley and a handful of other supporters talked about the economic doors the resort would open. But speaker after speaker, backed by a show of waving hands (the commission had discouraged applause), said the money gained wasn't worth eroding the mountain's wild state.

"If we give away this valley," said Patrick Scallon of Hood River, "we have no one to fault but ourselves."