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Ski resort owner rethinks plan

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by Wendy Owen

In a compromise to appease critics, Mt. Hood Meadows is reconsidering plans to develop a destination resort on 620 acres of land it acquired in a trade with Hood River County.

Instead, Meadows would squeeze the resort's proposed condos, homes, hotel and other amenities onto 160 acres of land it bought from a private owner. That land includes buildings at Cooper Spur, a small ski resort south of Hood River.

The 620 acres the company got in a 2001 trade with the county are in a watershed that supplies 2,500 Hood River County residents. Several groups have criticized plans to develop the site, saying the resort, especially a proposed 18-hole golf course, would pollute groundwater.

"We've heard loud and clear that the community wants the watershed protected," said Dave Riley, Meadows general manager.

The company, which owns Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort, is considering three options for the 620 acres: selling it back to the county, trading it for nearby U.S. Forest Service land or making it a conservation area.

County Commissioner Rodger Schock said he would be reluctant to buy back the land and wasn't sure the county could afford it.

Doug Jones, a lands and permits specialist with the Forest Service, said the agency probably wouldn't approve a land trade because of the public outcry against the resort.

That might leave only one option: placing the land in a conservation trust, the choice least likely to make money for Meadows.

Riley remains optimistic that all options are viable, but he favors a land swap with the Forest Service. He said that was an idea developed by local residents. "What I'm hearing is, it's a great idea."

The exchange would swap Meadows' 620 acres to the Forest Service for 350 acres adjacent to the small parcel that Meadows already owns. Instead of being limited to building homes, condos and small shops on the 160-acre parcel, Meadows could then expand into the new section.

"The best outcome would be an exchange with the Forest Service, because of the mutual gains," Riley said. "The land (620 acres) would go back into public hands, and we would receive . . . land outside the watershed and farther away from farmland, which we could develop."

But that option is the least compelling of the three, said Ken Maddox, chairman of the Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition. The organization is a collection of 15 environmental and watchdog groups and the main critic of the resort.

"It would be even more up the slope of Mount Hood. It would be a larger piece of land, and it would be close to the wilderness area," said Maddox, whose group opposes any development on the mountain. "There is no right way to do a wrong thing."

Maddox likes the idea of turning the 620 acres into a conservation area.

On Wednesday, he took it a step further, saying his group would be interested in buying the land if it could find the money.

"Actually, we'd like to buy the whole thing, period, if they're interested in a modest return," Maddox said, referring to the entire resort site, including Cooper Spur. Rather than developing it, the group would keep it wild, Maddox said.

Riley said he was unaware of the coalition's interest in buying the land but would be willing to listen to a proposal.

In retrospect, Riley said, he probably shouldn't have pursued the 620 acres. "Quite frankly, we underestimated the problem," he said in a meeting Tuesday night.

The land trade quickly turned nettlesome for Meadows and Hood River County when a group of county residents, now members of the Wild and Free Coalition, criticized the move.

The county traded its 620 acres and \$1 million for 785 acres of Meadows land, much of it holding marketable timber. A year later, the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, a citizens group, filed a lawsuit to overturn the trade. A Hood River County judge dismissed the case, which is now under appeal.

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