

Meeting looks toward Cooper Spur compromise

Mt. Hood Meadows will tell opponents Tuesday of proposals to drop a golf course and trim development in favor of a land swap with the Forest Service

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by MARK LARABEE

Mt. Hood Meadows is offering to pare back its plans to develop a destination ski resort and golf course near Cooper Spur by trading most of the land it owns there for two smaller buildable properties in Government Camp.

Everyone involved in years of debate over what's right for Mount Hood's northeastern flank has a different take on talks scheduled to begin Tuesday between Meadows and a group of Hood River residents who have taken the fight over Cooper Spur to the courthouse and ballot box.

Meadows is proposing to trade 600 acres it owns near Cooper Spur for 120 acres of U.S. Forest Service land in Government Camp that is already zoned for residential use. If approved, the trade would protect the water source for some 2,500 Hood River Valley farms and homes, the manager of the ski area says.

Despite the 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.

The talks would give residents a strong voice in how Meadows might develop Cooper Spur, but not everyone is optimistic.

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.

Alarm over destination resort

Emotions have run high since Meadows first pitched its plan for a Cooper Spur resort in 2002. The company now runs the 10-lift Mt. Hood Meadows ski area on the southeast side of the mountain as well as a quaint single-chair resort and lodge at Cooper Spur. The company holds a Forest Service permit for 1,400 skiable acres at Cooper Spur and plans to add other lifts.

The original resort plan called for turning the small ski area, at an elevation of 4,000 feet, 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. Opponents also claimed the project could contaminate water used for drinking and irrigation.

The fight was multipronged. Among other things, 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.

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.

Hood River County Commissioner Rodger Schock said he was tired of the rancor and asked Meadows and residents groups to come together.

"My goal is to reach a satisfactory solution that will bring peace to the valley," he said.

But that may be more difficult than it appears.

Prospect of two developments

The Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition -- 15 recreation, environmental and citizen activist groups that joined forces to protect the area -- has refused to participate in the upcoming talks. The group filed the pending lawsuit over the initial county land swap.

Ken Maddox, coalition president, said Meadows' 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.

"The land that's proposed to be traded away is not in the plans for the development," he said. "It's not clear that this land swap would change anything."

He also said the group felt uncomfortable dictating to residents in Government Camp what they should accept.

"If the land trade involved all of the land or a commitment or deed restriction that commits it to not being developed, that would change the complexion considerably," he said.

Mike McCarthy, a board member of the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, said his group is interested in talking despite its reservations. His family has lived for generations in the valley, and he was one of the chief supporters of the ballot measure limiting forest land development.

"We are not sure if we can come to a satisfactory agreement," he said. "Our primary goal is to protect the watershed, the wildlife and other resources on this side of the mountain."

And, he said, they want a promise that there would be no destination resort.

"One of our main goals in this whole negotiation is not to end up with development on both sides of the mountain."

Seeking consensus

Dave Riley, vice president and general manager of Mt. 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. And he said it brings the Forest Service land in Government Camp -- zoned for housing in 1999 by Clackamas County -- into the forefront of economic improvements for the small, unincorporated town.

He also said Meadows hopes to expand at Cooper Spur.

"If the trade went through, we wouldn't have enough acreage left for an 18-hole golf course," he said. At the same time, "the exchange wouldn't mean we are walking away from Cooper Spur. The mediation would talk about what we would do with the balance of the property."

Riley said the upheaval over the resort plans at Cooper Spur caused the company to go back and look at other options. He said it's unrealistic to think that a plan with such vehement opposition would have been approved.

Doug Jones, lands and permit specialist with the Forest Service's Hood River Ranger District, said any trade that involves public land must have some public benefit.

Jones is versed on the details of the proposed trade and expects Meadows to submit a formal proposal. He acknowledged that the trade would allow Meadows to develop on both sides of the mountain, though called that scenario "an uphill battle in a long convoluted process."

Riley said his hope is to find a solution that meets the needs of his company, the environment and the community. He said he's optimistic and he realizes any settlement would have to be acceptable to all sides or it won't be "implementable."

"Collaboration is a progressive way to do business," he said. "It can create certainty on both sides and it can be an efficient way to sort through problems. I see this process as providing the opportunity to draw the line."

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