

Residents balk at proposal to swap land on Mount Hood

Ski resort's deal could sacrifice forestland for resort, opponents say

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By Ben Jacklet

The company that owns and operates Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort is on the verge of closing a land swap deal that opponents fear will damage the alpine ecosystem, waste taxpayers' money and turn forestland into a large development on the relatively pristine north slope of Mount Hood.

Portland-based Mt. Hood Meadows Development Corp. recently bought 156 acres of land in addition to the Cooper Spur Inn and Ski Area, a small resort with big potential for expansion. Now the company is closing in on a land swap that would bring it hundreds of acres and \$1 million in cash from Hood River County.

The deal would exchange 620 acres owned by Hood River County for 750 acres owned by the ski resort. A \$1 million payment from the county to Mt. Hood Meadows would compensate for the extra 130 acres of timber on the private land, explained Hood River County Administrator David Meriwether.

The county has approved the land swap, but the deal is not closed, and opponents are considering filing a lawsuit.

The county assessor calculated the value of the land beneath the timber at \$325 an acre. Quarter-acre lots in a nearby housing development sell for about \$40,000.

Local residents and environmentalists say the county's assessment formula was badly flawed. They point out that the land that would go to the ski area surrounds the smaller resort and inn it just bought.

The county assessor based his appraisals only on available timber, since the land swap involves two timber properties.

Because the 730 acres owned by Mt. Hood Meadows is located in remote zoned forestland, it can't be developed.

Meriwether said Mt. Hood Meadows has not come forward with a specific development plan for the 620 acres, so it would be too speculative to treat the land as a future resort as opposed to a forest.

Mt. Hood Meadows General Manager Dave Riley said the company hasn't formally proposed any new development yet. He said of the opposition: "They're like a hunter in the woods looking for deer that aren't there. They want to shoot something, but there's nothing there to shoot."

Residents, however, said Riley has met with local groups to discuss the possibility of a new destination resort with about 450 housing units, a golf course, retail shops and restaurants.

Given those discussions, members of the Hood River Valley Residents Committee say it is ridiculous to value the land as if it were merely forestland.

The citizens group recently hired a licensed appraiser to examine the swap. Robert Bancroft, president of the Oregon chapter of the American Society of Farm Managers and Rural Appraisers, concluded in a Feb. 21 declaration that "this could be a sweetheart deal for Meadows, getting the land at forestland values, plus \$1,000,000, as well as Hood River County's likely commitment to assist with the upzoning for a resort, all without adequate public participation."

Meadows could expand Located about 25 miles south of Hood River, Cooper Spur Ski Area has been in operation since 1927. The 320-foot-high hill has no chairlifts, just a T-bar and a rope tow that serve 10 runs on 50 acres. Season passes are a mere \$99.

Cooper Spur's permit with the U.S. Forest Service, however, covers 1,400 acres, making expansion a possibility. Mt. Hood Meadows eventually may decide to connect the smaller hill to the bigger resort, or to develop lodging at Cooper Spur to serve Meadows, which has no overnight accommodations because it lies in a national forest.

Mike McCarthy, who owns a nearby 100-acre farm and is a member of the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, doesn't want to see that happen.

"Why should we let some large corporation own and control and exploit a huge number of acres on Mount Hood?" he asked.

McCarthy said the land swap would threaten thousands of acres of forest, a migration corridor for elk and deer and a watershed that provides drinking water for 2,000 people. He fears more traffic along the winding road that passes his farm, and more air, water and noise pollution.

McCarthy said Mt. Hood Meadows has a history of building parking lots in wetlands, spilling oil and filling in live streams with parking lot debris.

McCarthy's group is being represented by Chris Winter and Ralph Bloemers, two Portland environmental attorneys who run the nonprofit Cascade Resources Advocacy Group.

Bloemers was a key activist behind the group that successfully stopped McDonald's Corp. from placing one of its fast-food restaurants on Southeast Hawthorne Boulevard last year. He likens the mountain land swap to a backroom deal and vows, "It's not final."

Year-round activity is goal The Meadows' Riley said he expects the deal to close within a month. While he would not offer specific plans for the new forestland, he said the company is looking to diversify into year-round tourism.

Mt. Hood Meadows employs 1,000 people in the winter but just 60 in the summer, he said.

The ski area has stormed through the recession with huge snowfalls and record revenues. More than 15,000 people, mostly from metropolitan Portland, buy lift tickets there each weekend. And with the timber and farming industries both hurting, Riley said investing in tourism makes good sense, economically and environmentally.

"We're doing the mountain a favor by taking the demand for recreation and accommodating it in areas where it's carefully managed and controlled," he said. "If it were all dispersed recreation with no facilities, that would stress the mountain much worse."

The ski area recycles its bottles, cans and cardboard; restores damaged lands with native plants; and uses minimal grading when designing new trails, Riley said.

A recent report by the environmental watchdog group Ski Area Citizens graded all of the major ski resorts in the West. It gave Mt. Hood Meadows a C because of its expansion plans and past practice of dumping fill into nearby creeks.

The same group gave Timberline Ski Area, also located on Mount Hood, an A.

"We've had a couple of small problems that we've corrected," Riley said. "We've cleaned up everything, and we're not in violation of any regulations."

Riley argues that it would be naive to pretend that the market for more mountain resorts doesn't exist, given the area's proximity to excellent mountain biking, windsurfing and cross-country and alpine skiing.

"The best that we can do is to look ahead at the demand that is going to occur, and plan for it, giving respect to the health of the ecosystem," he said.

Area farmer McCarthy counters that the best way to respect the Mount Hood ecosystem is to stop building on the mountain.

"I wish that we could get away from this idea that we have to create a city in the forest to come recreate in it," he said. "My family's been recreating in this area since 1910. We didn't need any shopping malls and golf courses then, and we don't now."

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