

■ **GREY HIGHLANDS:** Municipality refuses to meet Minnis behind closed doors

Talisman owner says negative publicity hurting his chances to resurrect resort

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The owner of Talisman resort says he has a plan for the medium- and long-term future of the resort.

But Bill Minnis said a meeting Monday with Grey Highlands council to discuss them was scuttled when council refused to meet with him behind closed doors.

"I thought it would be more appropriate if I could have had a working session with council, a closed door session with council that would allow us to (say) here's the plan and get their meaningful comment back," Minnis, the president and chairman of Talisman Resort Inc., said during an interview Monday afternoon from his home in the Beaver Valley.

"There has been, it's fair to say, an awful lot of press with respect to Talisman and none of it has been conducive to marketing the property, repositioning the property. Frankly it's been pretty negative. If we're to avoid that let's have a plan, let's discuss a plan, let's agree to a plan and then put that to the community in public session."

Dan Best, Grey Highlands' chief administrative officer, in answer to concerns raised by a resident at Monday's council meeting explained that, under



Sun Times file photo

A broken sign points to empty parking lots in a photograph taken last February.

the Municipal Act, closed sessions of council are limited to specific reasons and a meeting to discuss the plan does not qualify.

But Minnis argues an open session would only encourage the proliferation of negative discussion, which would further impair Talisman's reputation rather than permit candid and productive discussion to reach

an acceptable plan for the future of the embattled resort.

"It's not going to get done without discussion, co-operation and a joint effort (between) the ownership of Talisman and council," said Minnis, who stressed he wants to retain ownership of the property and avoid seeing it sold for back taxes.

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Owner says his plans were sent to municipality

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"The concept of having the property sold as a tax sale has limited benefit to anyone in the long term that I can see, myself included," he said.

He blamed the once vibrant resort falling on hard times on the financial crisis of 2008 and the loss of support by a key financial backer.

"We had great plans and intentions for Talisman. It was very important part of an overall land development play and resort play . . . but if we go back to 2008 where we had this debt crisis, it was a very, very critical period for Talisman," Minnis said.

"One of our significant partners in the transaction was a U.S. institution and as those issues became very pronounced in the U.S., that certainly impacted their ability to complete this transaction with us."

Minnis is confident he can regroup and find new financial partners, but that is made more difficult with the looming threat of a tax sale and negative press.

"We have to come together

with the municipality and agree to a plan and move forward."

Minnis said Best has a copy of his proposed plan but has been asked not to make it public.

Meanwhile, council has given Best approval to move forward with plans for Grey Highlands to use its power of entry under the Municipal Act which permits the municipality to visit the Talisman property to assess its condition before making a decision on the future of the resort.

"I've already sent to Mr. Best earlier today suggesting to him that we would provide access at their convenience," said Minnis, who supports council getting up to date information on the state of the resort, which has been closed since March 2011.

Best explained there are a few options open to the municipality regarding the future of Talisman. They include holding another tax sale or taking possession of the property and resort.

The municipality is owned more than \$2 million in back taxes and water and sewer charges on the main property,

which has several buildings and ski hills and a golf course. The first tax sale received no bids on that property. Two related smaller parcels of land were sold.

Taking possession of the property would open several possibilities, such as selling it on the real estate market, leasing it, entering into a partnership agreement to develop the property or putting out a request for ideas by prospective developers, Best said.

"We have to determine the state of the building and the property . . . If we vest (take possession of) the property, we have to have a good knowledge of what we're vesting and what the conditions of that property" are, Deputy-mayor Paul McQueen said during Monday's council meeting. "If we're going to another public sale process, I think the people putting in bids would also want to know the status and the condition of the building and the property."

A resolution passed by council to exercise its power of entry calls for a handful of officials, such as

the chief building official, fire chief, structural engineers and environmental experts, to be allowed to view the property and buildings. Best promised to bring back a motion for council's approval to enter Talisman once he finds out when the experts are available.

"Right now you hear all kinds of rumours about the building. Let's get some concrete answers to those questions and then we can make some decisions from that. You can see the urgency of the situation. You can see the frustration of the public that the owner did not appear here today," said McQueen. "We're disappointed that the property is in the state that it is in. It's not a positive thing for our community and we'd like to get that straightened out and so does the public."

Minnis said he is willing to work with the municipality.

"I'm just looking for a mechanism where we can get going and not this thing stalled any further . . . I think we should get at it as soon as possible," he said.

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