

# Coalition asks for time to create a proposal for Beaver Valley properties

Grey Highlands council opened up a special session on the Friday afternoon of the long weekend to listen to concerns about the future of municipal lands near Talisman.

Speakers asked for time – three months, although one speaker said with COVID twice that might be more realistic – to create a workable future that would respect the unique natural features of the Beaver Valley.

What has touched off the concern is news that the municipality in closed session had agreed to a joint venture with owners of the former Talisman to take offers for developing the land.

The municipality recently hosted a series of public input sessions after announcing the joint venture agreement. About 650 people signed a petition, including about 280 from Grey Highlands and 220 from the surrounding area, asking that council delay any sale of the lands so the group can form a viable plan that puts the environment first.

Activities include public use, conservation and education as well as possible accommodation along with that.

The 30-minute delegation was followed by questions and a discussion for another hour.

Mary Ferguson, who presented first, said that the coalition included Friends of the Beaver Valley of which she is a member, Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, Elephant Thoughts, Kimberley Safety Group and Sustainable Livelihood Canada. The last group is one in which Linda Reader is involved, a group working on bridging employment barriers by providing

environment-related job experience.

Ms Reader spoke as part of her work with the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy. The president of that group, Robert Barnett, also spoke. That group owns properties which are set aside through land trusts. They include Kimbercote in the Beaver Valley and other properties in Meaford and Town of the Blue Mountains.

There is the possibility of other groups being approached as well.

The coalition's aim is "to protect and preserve the ecological integrity, the wildlife corridor, the watershed and the natural landmarks."

Rob Leverty of the Niagara Escarpment Foundation spoke to support the delegation on their invitation.

He referred to the main Talisman property having come into the Municipality's hands one because of back taxes owed and then being sold. (The municipality still owns the property above and below Talisman.)

Now, if the three parcels could be used for different purposes that are sensitive to the nature of the area, it would be

"a second chance now to be stewards of these assets."

When asked, representatives said they had reached out to the owners but were told that approaches had to go through thinkCOMPASS, the company chosen to work on the joint venture.

The value of the property needs to be determined. There is as yet no full description of the opportunity, Economic Development director Michele Harris said, adding

that other groups have expressed interest.

Mr. Leverty harked back to past initiatives to develop the Valley, and said that with that route not having been taken, there was an "inherent decision to focus massive development away from the Beaver Valley."

Over that time, he said, there has been shift in the agricultural sector to seeing that land can be overwhelmed and overdeveloped, with more support for preservation and land and water. The same is true of those who like to hunt and fish, he said.

"I think for the first time in 47 years, the general public have for the first time said very clearly that nature first is the way to go," he said.

"The problem we face is the more the Beaver Valley is an oasis, a world biosphere, the more it is open to exploitation and threat."

"You've got the team here, we're ready," said Linda Reader, re-emphasizing the request for time to bring the work together.

An aspect highlighted by Mayor Paul McQueen and Coun. Paul Allen during the discussion is the costs from the local water and wastewater system.

Even when large volumes are not flowing from Talisman, the base service charges continue, which are based on the (large) size of the service connection. That has led to high ongoing costs, which the present owners of Talisman have appealed to the municipality about in the past.

Similarly, the Talisman property has been assigned so many units which affects the wastewater costs, and that remains the same

whether the building is occupied or not.

The Amik and Kimberley service does not have a high total number of units. So rates could rise if the Talisman funding for the system ended.

"Say this ended up as hiking trails nothing else – what about those allocations?" Coun. Allen asked.

"The presentation was great – it's something that's desirable.. but with every good thing, there are bad parts to them."

Other users would have to pick up the cost if those users are removed, he observed.

Ms Reader said that the Talisman portion of the lands was unlikely to end up unused, but would more likely be a revenue-generating part of the project with an eco-centre and accommodation, for example.

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Thanks

Heal  
Gail