

# Groups look to preserve Talisman area of Beaver Valley

GREG COWAN

Concerned Grey Highlanders and conservationists are asking the municipality to delay any sale or development of more than 200 acres of land in the Beaver Valley so it may be preserved.

In late April, the municipality began its Beaver Valley Planning Partnership seeking the public's input about the future of the former Talisman Resort.

The resort has a robust history in the area as a ski hill, golf club and tourism hub. However, in 2009, financial difficulties forced the resort into bankruptcy.

Since then, the sprawling property has been divided into three parcels. The municipality took over the entire 200-acre property in 2013 after it developed over \$2 million in tax arrears and sat abandoned and deteriorating. The municipality severed the top of the property, nearly 60 acres, and sold the rest to a numbered company.

The numbered company ran into its own financial troubles while reportedly spending millions restoring the resort. In 2019, it sought \$35 million in financing to complete renovations at the resort with the hopes of reopening.

Recently, the municipality foreclosed on the former golf course.

Today, the municipality owns the golf course (75 acres) and the top portion of the property (60 acres), while the numbered company owns the lodge property (66 acres).

The two ownership parties announced an agreement last year to collectively market and promote the property to prospective buyers. Both parties are working with the consulting firm thinkCOMPASS.

Now, while the municipality is canvassing the public for their thoughts on the future development of the Beaver Valley, concerned citizens are asking that the Talisman be preserved.

A group of local landowners and conservationists is asking the municipality for time to explore ways of accomplishing their goal of keeping the lands under natural

stewardship.

Some of the individuals and groups involved are Joyce Hall, chair of the Grey Highlands Climate Action Group; Jeanette Walters, a local landowner; Stacie Howe, proprietor of the Kimberley General Store; Dr. Mary Ferguson, a senior partner at EkoNomos; and Linda Reader from the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC). An online petition has also been circulated by the group.

Grey Highlands Mayor Paul McQueen said a special two-hour council meeting has been called for this Friday to hear from group members. He said members of the group originally wished to speak at a May 5 meeting, but the only item on the agenda was in-camera, and only three minutes would have been allotted, and therefore an alternative has been arranged.

"I called this special meeting, the idea being they'll have two hours and council will be able to ask questions and see what they're requesting. Sometimes you can't do it in 10 minutes," McQueen said.

McQueen said representatives from the EBC have been asked to attend the meeting.

The EBC has created more than 180 nature reserves for a total of 14,500 acres protected in southern Ontario - the largest regional land trust in Ontario and the second largest charitable land trust in the province behind the Nature Conservancy of Canada. They were contacted by Grey Highlands landowners who were concerned the Talisman property was set to be sold to developers.

Reader said EBC contacted thinkCOMPASS about the property, and will likely submit a formal proposal. However, without knowing how much the land is worth and the condition of the buildings on-site, there is a lot of fact-finding ahead.

Their vision is first and foremost to protect the land in perpetuity, but Reader said there are opportunities for sustainable development. She said one possibility for a coalition-based purchase is to make the Talisman land a "focal point" for

environmental sustainability and development.

"There could be a centre for environmental studies, entrepreneurial activities for people who have ideas about sustainable tourism, and other kinds of projects. We're trying to balance it between protecting the environment and providing experiences, education, and opportunities for businesses - it's a tough one - but there's a lot of land there," Reader said.

Meanwhile, the Niagara Escarpment Foundation published a nine-page letter to the Grey Highlands mayor advocating for the municipality to protect, at least, the undeveloped portion of the property.

"If the public lands currently owned by the Municipality of Grey Highlands at Talisman are sold to maximize development and profits, this would constitute an unprecedented rupture of the historic tradition of private-public partnership faithfully supporting the NEP (Niagara Escarpment Plan) in the Beaver Valley," the letter signed by NEF president Robert Levertys said. "Maximizing development is not and should not be promoted as the only means by which income can be generated from the Talisman lands. An alternative, conservation-first vision for the Talisman lands needs to be explored thoroughly. The protection, restoration and enhancement of natural areas and outstanding landscapes can yield substantial economic benefits."

The current designation of the Talisman property in the NEP is Escarpment Recreation Area. The designation permits a range of uses including ski runs, ski lifts and toboggan runs that require the slope, a ski lodge and a golf course. Other permitted uses include single dwellings and commercial development normally associated with a ski centre (e.g., retail stores, service establishments, etc.).

Most of the Beaver Valley is protected by the most stringent NEP designations, Escarpment Natural Area and Escarpment Protection Area, the letter said.

Thanks  
Pearl  
&  
Gard