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Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy submits formal offer for municipally-owned Talisman land

GREG COWAN

The Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy submitted a formal written offer to the Municipality of Grey Highlands to acquire the municipally-owned lands at the former Talisman Resort.

According to a news release, the EBC submitted its offer on Aug. 20.

"If accepted by Grey Highlands, EBC intends to preserve these provincially and nationally important lands in perpetuity as a nature reserve and for community recreational use, including perma-

nently preserving the Bruce Trail running through the lands," the release said.

The Bruce Trail Conservancy recently issued its own statement reaffirming a strong interest in permanently securing the Bruce Trail on the site of the former Talisman Resort lands.

"The Bruce Trail has crossed these lands by verbal agreement since 1965. This section of trail forms part of an 86 kilometre continuous route through the Beaver Valley that links with the Town of Blue Mountains and the

Municipality of Meaford. It is evident that the trail passing through the former Talisman Resort lands forms a critical link between a chain of publicly owned lands, including Bruce Trail Conservancy lands secured specifically for the Bruce Trail, and its conservation corridor. Understanding the importance of this route, the Bruce Trail Conservancy is optimistic public access in this location will be maintained, permanently," the conservancy group said in its statement.

SEE OFFER ON A3

Conditional sale on lands

OFFER FROM A1

There is a catch.

Earlier this month, Grey Highlands and a Greater Toronto Area capital management and development firm announced an agreement to a conditional sale of the municipally-owned lands at the former Talisman Resort.

The conditional sale includes the same municipally-owned lands at the former resort -- the former golf course property (74.5 acres) and the recreational lands overlooking the ski hills (59.5 acres) -- the EBC has now offered to purchase. A 139.7-acre third parcel on the sprawling former resort property is known as the Talisman Springs Inn and is owned by a private numbered company, 2420124 Ontario Limited, owned by Brian Ellis and partners.

Westway Capital and Ellis had entered into discussions regarding the privately-owned parcel shortly after a conditional agreement with the municipality was reached, according to an interview with Ellis.

The EBC said their all-cash offer is conditional on having a period of time to raise the funds to pay for the land, which it said it's confident it can accomplish.

"While Grey Highlands has been negotiating with a development group to build multiple residential and other units on the site, we expect that the municipality will see that our offer is consistent with the strong views expressed by hundreds of community members in the recent Beaver Valley Visioning sessions, as well as its own official plan and climate change policies," said Bob Barnett, EBC executive director. "Large scale residential and commercial development is not an appropriate use for these lands, which should be preserved in their natural state and managed to provide ecosystem services, available for use by the wider community."

Barnett went on to say the EBC is not aware of the conditions as part of the Westway Capital offer but assumes the municipality has protected its right to consider competing offers.

"Our offer is a demonstrably better use of public lands for the community than large-scale development in an environmentally important UNESCO heritage site," he said. The EBC said its offer was made at the appraised values of the two municipally-owned parcels based on an independent appraiser's initial understanding of the development potential for the land, but the purchase price may be adjusted to reflect the actual estimated value of these lands to a commercial developer. In an e-mail, Grey Highlands CAO Karen Govan said the municipality and Westway Capital are in a due diligence period related to the sale of the properties.

"Negotiations have only been related to the purchase of the land and ensuring development for the properties stays in line with the vision of the community for the full Beaver Valley Corridor (and municipal Council and staff representatives continue to meet with Westway to ensure alignment)," Govan said. "No plans for development have been presented at this time, so any speculation on the types of development that Westway may be considering would be premature."

Govan said any future development at the site must be approved by the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority, the Niagara Escarpment Commission and align with both Grey County and the Municipality of Grey Highlands' official plans.

During a special council meeting in May earlier this year, Westway Capital proposed to "develop a world-class resort that will promote health, wellness and follow the principles of sustainable development, that will integrate the beauty of the area and the natural heritage of the Beaver Valley" according to presentation slides submitted to the municipality and included in the meeting's agenda.

Paul Mondell, who has worked as a vice-president with Skyline Investments, the resort company with Blue Mountain Village in its portfolio, was acting as a senior planning consultant for the firm, according to the presentation slides and a delegation request form submitted to the municipality.

A planning "vision board" submitted with the presentation included a sprawling resort with several pools, plans to expand trails and offer health and wellness training, the creation of public amenities like bird-watching and wellness platforms, vertical-grow greenhouses, and a farmer's market.

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