

Environmental groups demand reconsideration on sale of the Talisman property

By: [Jennifer Golletz](#)



The municipality of Grey Highlands has moved into a conditional sale agreement with Westway Capital, a private investment firm from Toronto for the sale of the former Talisman lands. Contributed photo.

The Niagara Escapement Foundation (NEF) is voicing its displeasure with Grey Highlands' decision to sell the former Talisman property in Kimberley to a private investment firm.

"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 Niagara Escarpment Plan in the Beaver Valley," said Rob Leverty, president of the NEF in a public statement issued on Friday morning.

On Thursday, the municipality of [Grey Highlands announced that it has moved into a conditional sale agreement with Westway Capital](#), a private investment firm from Toronto for the sale of the former Talisman lands.

The announcement came as a shock to many in the community, as well as several organizations that had concurrently been working to present the municipality with alternative development options.

Leverty said Grey Highlands council should abandon the conditional sale of its Talisman lands to Westway Capital and instead, consider all “conservation-first proposals” for the future of the property.

He explained that the NEF had made a submission to Grey Highlands council in early May, which outlined its concerns about the sale of the property in [a nine-page document](#). But, according to Leverty, the foundation never received a response or acknowledgement of the submission from the municipality.

“The council betrayed the public’s trust by quietly working for several weeks with Westway Capital on a deal to sell the municipal lands,” Leverty stated.

“In ignoring the submissions and proposals from Beaver Valley community members as well as the Foundation while secretly considering the Westway Capital offer to purchase, Grey Highlands has not engaged in fair play,” he continued.

Leverty added that Grey Highlands Mayor Paul McQueen sits on the Ontario government’s Niagara Escarpment Commission as the representative for Grey County, and that he would “do well to remember that as Grey Highlands plans for the future of the lands”.

He stated that the foundation is profoundly disappointed by the announcement, especially because it made no reference to the Niagara Escarpment, ignoring its designation as a United Nations Biosphere, and makes no reference to either the Greenbelt or the environmentally protective Niagara Escarpment Plan that directs the types of land uses allowed on the Talisman lands.

“It is precisely because of the protective policies of the Niagara Escarpment Plan that the Beaver Valley is green and shielded from rampant development along its continuous natural corridor,” Leverty said.

Grey Highlands CAO Karen Govan said that the council members spent a significant amount of time reviewing all of the submissions from the community, other stakeholders, as well as the community consultation outcomes prior to making the decision to enter into the sale agreement.

“Council has considered this opportunity related to the long-term impact for the community and have not based their decision simply on the offer price for the said lands,” Govan said.

She added that the discussions around the sale of the Talisman were conducted in closed session as per the municipality’s standard procedure that “any discussions related to proposed or pending acquisition or disposition of land by the municipality take place in closed session.”

Additionally, Govan confirmed that the conditional sale agreement announced on Thursday pertains only to the municipality's two-third portion of the property, and does not include the one-third of the property where the former lodge sits, which is currently owned by a private number company.

"This conditional sale is only related to the municipally owned lands. The developers are continuing to explore opportunities with the private sector owners of the former lodge property," Govan said.

A [community coalition that had been working toward acquiring the property](#) - Friends of the Beaver Valley - said that they are also extremely disappointed with the recent development.

"The Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy (EBC) and the Friends of the Beaver Valley (FBV) are extremely disappointed to learn from a press release that the municipality of Grey Highlands has made a conditional sale of the lands they own on the Talisman site," the group stated in a public statement issued on Thursday.

EBC and FBV presented their interest in the properties for recreation and ecological preservation in a [special public meeting to Grey Highlands council in late May](#) and followed-up with a letter of intent.

According to representatives from the EBC, the organization has also prepared a conditional offer for the same lands that they have been trying to present to staff since July 12.

The coalition has been working toward the goal of keeping the property in the public domain.

The group would like to see the lands managed as a nature reserve-- respecting its diverse and fragile ecosystem-- by "creating a coalition of conservation bodies, community-based entrepreneurs, educators, organizations and individuals [with] land-use decisions based on clearly defined, transparent principles, be long-term and evolutionary in its planning time frame, and maintain public control through a locally-grounded, innovative non-profit development model."

Despite the recent decision made by the council, FBV said they will continue to push forward with their proposal as the sale agreement is currently still conditional and must work through the due diligence process.

"We are moving ahead with our offer on the two municipal pieces during this 'due diligence' period. This is an ongoing process," stated Jeanette Parry on behalf of the FBV.

In its press release, Grey Highlands stated its plans to "encourage opportunities for collaborative undertakings between the developers and the community groups who have expressed interest".

Govan explained that would be done through regular meetings between council representatives, Grey Highlands staff and the team from Westway.

"They will be encouraging conversations, following up on outcomes, and ensuring that key parties and groups have an opportunity to discuss ways to work together to support collective objectives," Govan said.