

Conditional deal made with Westway Capital for Beaver Valley properties

No word yet about the former Talisman resort itself, but Grey Highlands has struck a deal for the two neighbouring properties it owns.

"The last seven years nothing's happened to Talisman - here's an opportunity," said Mayor Paul McQueen in an interview with the Advance.

Last Thursday morning, the Municipality confirmed that it had accepted a conditional offer from Westway Capital. One of the group that spoke to council, planner Paul Mondell, is part of Skyline Investments.

Skyline holds assets of more than \$700 million, that include Blue Mountain as well as other Ontario resorts.

CAO Karen Govan told the Advance that the details of the deal won't be released until the conditions are removed. Until then, the offer is still considered to be "under negotiation," which qualifies it to be discussed in closed session.

The municipality owns pieces of land that adjoin Talisman on either side - what is called the "Golf Course" property of about 75 acres; and another property at the top of the

same size. The former Lodge property of about 65 acres is owned by 2420124 Ontario Limited (Brian Ellis and Phil Calvanos).

The private and public owners entered into a joint venture agreement to market the property, and council heard two public presentations from interested parties.

Westway Capital made its pitch to council late in May for a proposal for a health and wellness spa, a resort, and some residential, such as condos.

That came within a week of another presentation by the Friends of the Beaver Valley and the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy.

Those groups were forming a coalition to preserve the land while doing some environmental education and accommodation, and had started a petition and a GoFundMe page for support.

Bob Barnett of the Conservancy told the Advance on Friday that work is continuing on their proposal, noting that the current deal is still conditional.

Westway representatives

told council that only 20 percent of the publicly-owned lands were developable, because of NEC and planning regulations, and that the public would be able to use the natural areas.

The municipality heard from the public about the possible future use of the properties in public "visioning" sessions, and in a temporary drop-in presence in a storefront a few years ago in downtown Markdale.

Said the mayor: "We heard loud and clear what those community groups were saying and what's important to them and we're going to have to find that balance... There's a lot of green space that's going to be maintained."

If the conditions are removed and the deal proceeds, there will be ongoing discussions between members of council and the developers to make sure that message is communicated, he said.

But there were harsh words on Friday from non-profit Niagara Escarpment Foundation. President Rob Leverty, called the decision a "Betrayal of Public Trust" in a letter "strenuously opposing" the sale.

The Foundation wrote to council in May saying that six months should be given to the coalition of environmental groups to develop their proposal.

Low-impact, minimal development with conservation-first could yield economic benefits and also support stewardship, the foundation said.

Council members asked Westway at its presentation about preserving nature and allowing public access.

Presenters said that there would be no attempt to limit public use of the natural area for hiking or bird-watching.

As a member of the Niagara Escarpment Commission, Mayor Paul McQueen said that he's confident in the protections that are in place with its Plan and in Conservation Authority and municipal zonings.

As a longtime politician, he has lived through Talisman's bankruptcy and the unpaid taxes that led to a tax sale in 2014. Since then, part of the property has come back into the municipality's possession again, when the amount for the vendor-take-back mortgage on the golf course was never paid.

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It will be an advantage to the community to have the resort flourish again, he said. "It's a bit of a blight on the landscape now," he said. "It's like an abandoned home."

Hope of action rose the last time when the municipality sold the former Talisman Mountain Inn property to Mr. Ellis and Mr. Calvanos. However, its planned redevelopment of the site never materialized. Expenses for the renovation were higher than expected, and there were ongoing water and wastewater costs from the time of possession. These are steep because of the size of the service.

Rates have been blended now for all the systems, including the Kimberley-Amik-Talisman.

The company had agreed to pay Grey Highlands \$1.8 million for the property which it held for back taxes. ("There are houses now worth more than that," the mayor remarked.)

The municipality received \$1.2 million from the numbered company,

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but ended up with the golf course back in its hands again when the \$600,000 was not paid.

There is still an outstanding bill for water and wastewater from the current owners of the resort, because the fixed costs of the system are charged even when there is no use.

"That's taxpayers' money up there," the Mayor said of the properties and the cash owed.

Thanks

Ken

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