

# GTA developer one step closer to purchasing former Talisman resort property

Greg Cowan – The Owen Sound Sun Times  
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The former Talisman Resort opened in 1963 and employed over 300 workers at its peak. Over a decade ago, a private company purchased the resort lands and has since failed to develop Talisman Mountain Springs Inn and Golf Club, a sign for which is seen here at the corner of Grey County Road 7 and Talisman Mountain Drive near Kimberly. Now, Westway Capital, a GTA-based developer, is seeking to build a "world class development that will promote health and wellness based on the principles of sustainable development". Westway capital and the Municipality of Grey Highlands recently reached a conditional deal on the sale of the municipally owned Talisman lands. Greg Cowan/The Sun Times

Grey Highlands and a Greater Toronto Area capital management and development firm have agreed to a conditional sale of the municipally owned lands at the former Talisman Resort.

Westway Capital proposes 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 a pitch presentation submitted to the municipality during a special council meeting in May.

Grey Highlands CAO Karen Govan said the conditional sale with Westway is subject to a due diligence period. No financial details of the offer were disclosed, but Govan said, once approved, the sale will be finalized during an open council session.

The conditional sale only includes the municipally owned lands at the former resort – the former golf course property (74.8 acres), and the recreational lands overlooking the ski hills (58.9 acres).

Last year, the municipality entered into a Joint Venture Agreement with the owners of the 139.7-acre parcel of land known as the Talisman Springs Inn, including the former resort buildings.

Westway Capital will now work with Brian Ellis and the partners of 2420124 Ontario Limited to acquire the remaining parcel.

“The intent was to move forward and market the properties collectively, so we’re confident and hopeful the next stage of the process will take place and council will have achieved what they set out to do,” Govan said.

Ellis said negotiations are underway between Westway Capital and his company, but no formal offer has been delivered and no agreement finalized.

Ellis said his first choice would be to remain involved in the project, either with Westway or with another financial backer. He said the only thing that isn't possible is keeping the "status quo".

"As of this morning we've been talking to them to see what we can do together," Ellis said. "Our first choice is absolutely to stay involved. We have a vision that we believe in and I think a lot of people believe in."

Ellis said he's still in contact with others who are interested in trying to finance his plan for the resort – an ongoing process for the past three years. Possible financial options for Ellis, and the hospitality industry as a whole, took a hit during COVID-19, he said.

He said he won't sell to Westway unless the GTA developer agrees to a sustainable vision for the development.

"It's about more than just a number," Ellis said. "We're a business, so numbers are important, but we're not willing to just walk away unless we are convinced that the vision they're going to undertake is going to basically be very similar to what we have . . . we know what's best for that area, we know what the strengths of the Beaver Valley are. The natural environment that encases that area is extremely important to us."

Ellis's company has invested over \$8 million in renovating the resort buildings throughout the past six years, he said.

"Westway seems to be full-on with our vision, but again I'd want to see something, I haven't seen an agreement in writing yet," he said. "I think we could be a huge asset, and if they want us out, as long as they're continuing with the vision I would definitely consider . . . our first choice is 100 per cent to remain a part of this development."

The Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy recently expressed their interest in the lands and issued a formal letter of intent, but have not yet presented an offer to either the municipality or Ellis.

Robert Barnett, executive director of the EBC, said a conditional offer from EBC is on its way. He also said he thinks the EBC would work best with Ellis' company and the municipality in a collaborative effort.

"We've had pretty friendly discussions with them. We like their concept," Barnett said.

Barnett said any offer tabled by the EBC would be conditional on a successful fundraising campaign, and that the EBC has loads of experience in such endeavours.

A local group seeking to conserve the lands at the former Talisman Resort, called the Friends of the Beaver Valley, had requested the municipality give them and the EBC time to formulate an offer and do their due diligence on the property.

Barnett didn't delve into details, but he said he doesn't expect the conditions of the Westway's offer to be met, and that the EBC, Friends, and Ellis' company may team up in a collaborative approach by the time the dust settles.

"I think that's the most likely scenario. Despite the news of the other day," Barnett said. "Maybe my reading of the cards is incorrect."

Linda Reader is a spokesperson for the Friends group and works in community and economic development. She said the Friends and the EBC are trying to set a meeting with the municipality to present their own conditional offer and collaborative approach.

"We found out by press release the same way everyone else did, the next day. In fairness, we knew, we didn't know exactly, but we knew it would be something that's not good for us," Reader said.

She said the municipality is taking a “foolish” step by turning their backs on the community that wishes to preserve the land and “has spoken out very clearly”. The Friends of the Beaver Valley wishes to see the Talisman lands managed as a nature reserve and is working to create a coalition of conservation bodies, community-based entrepreneurs, educators, organizations and individuals.

A Go Fund Me page created in support of the Friends concept has raised \$17,220 and more than 600 people have signed their petition.

“Why would the municipality not be interested in hearing another option?” Reader said. “Why would you sell to someone who will turn the Talisman site into a resort with condominiums and so on? It doesn’t make sense to me . . . I’m seeing mistakes here, based on the fact that ‘A’ it’s not what the community wants and ‘B’ it’s not what the trends are saying in tourism.”

Reader said research shows tourists are looking for natural escapes now more than ever and choose to hike and go on nature excursions rather than shop or dine.

According to a media release, the municipality received a formal offer from Westway Capital in June. Govan said it was the only formal offer received during the Joint Venture Agreement process.

Govan said the offer from Westway represents the best of both worlds, a group with experience and financial backing who are committed to creating a sustainable development in the area.

“We don’t want to pave a parking lot in paradise, that’s not what we’re trying to do here. There has to be a compromise and we’re trying to balance it out while listening to the needs of the entire community,” Govan said.

Govan said the plan Westway presented to council would have a positive impact on the greater municipality of Grey Highlands. She pointed to job creation, tourism benefits and lower water rates for the municipality’s system users.

Ellis said the water rates the municipality imposed on the property when he first bought over a decade ago were hundreds of thousands of dollars even though he never turned on the tap. He said since then he’s proud of the work he and the municipality have done to move to a blended system, and that with a resort functioning on the property, rates would be lowered for all users.

Govan also said any transfer of title for the remaining privately-owned parcel of land at the former Talisman Resort will settle outstanding taxes. Currently, approximately \$450,000 in taxes and fees are owed to the municipality.

Govan said, in her opinion, the municipality was looking for a buyer who could begin to develop the land immediately.

“You want to go with somebody who is tried-and-tested. You don’t want to go down the road where we end up with someone land-banking and sitting on the property and then we’re back to square one,” she said. “It’s my opinion Westway seems very passionate about the project, they do have experience which is a big plus, and yes, they do have the financial backing. The passion they showed for the project really showed us they’re committed to listening to the community and listening to council’s opinions and direction.”

The Niagara Escarpment Foundation spoke out against the municipality’s conditional sale to Westway on Friday, calling it a “betrayal of public trust” in a news release.

“It is profoundly disappointing that the Grey Highlands announcement does not refer 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,” said a statement by NEF president Rob Leverty.

Govan said part of the conditional offer of sale is a due diligence process in which Westway will secure approvals from the necessary bodies and conduct studies on the land.

As for the Friends of the Beaver Valley and EBC, they’re disappointed but undeterred. Reader said the group is trying to set a meeting with the municipality and still plans to formally present their collaborative offer and vision for the property.

“Maybe they’ll like it better,” Reader said. “We intend to continue. We intend to muster support. You have to remember these are elected officials and there is an election coming up, and conditional offers can go south . . . no, we’re not packing up.”



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photo shows part of the sprawling Talisman property near Kimberly with the former ski hills in the background. Greg Cowan/The Sun Times