

Grey Highlands finalizes sale of Talisman lands to Westway Capital

An offer of a total of \$2.5 million for upper and lower Talisman lands was passed by bylaw on Wednesday.

A well-organized protest, with website, petition, a court case and picketing on the day of the meeting did not dissuade council.

Nearly 30 people spoke during open forum in opposition to the sale. They were curtailed to one minute in order to hear from everyone.

A unanimous vote approved the sale, as Westway had waived its conditions. Plans for the main Talisman Inn property have not yet been announced, as it remained in the hands of 2420124 Ontario Inc. (represented by Phil Calvano and Brian Ellis).

There was an agreement with the municipality, those owners and thinkCOMPASS to market the properties jointly.

The conditional deal with Westway was announced in July, 2021 and the closing date would be on or before July 10, 2022. A legal challenge and determination to continue to advocate for natural use were the response from those who wanted Grey Highlands to retain the lands. (See related story)

The municipality has announced that Westway will now consult the public using firms including consultant Planning Partnership which Grey Highlands used for the

downtown Markdale and Beaver Valley areas.

Coun. Danielle Valiquette thanked the public for being engaged, and asked them to continue being engaged.

Council members appeared relieved to be able to speak out about their decision, and showed signs of the burden that they had been carrying.

Coun. Dane Neilsen observed that councillors were "a pretty diverse representation of the community" from all sides of the political spectrum.

And yet, the seven of them agree, he said, which he observed wryly is definitely not always the case.

He said that he had heard from many ratepayers — and the majority of them supported the sale. Among other points, he said lack of accommodation in Beaver Valley had been identified as a roadblock in local businesses benefiting from tourism.

Mayor McQueen noted in a prepared statement that while council heard from "passionate and vocal individuals" who oppose the proposal, there are many other residents and businesses who have spoken about the positive economic impact.

Deputy-Mayor Aakash Desai acknowledged it has been an emotional subject not just for the public but

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Talisman

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also for councillors.

While the offer from Westway was still conditional, it was kept confidential, a decision defended by staff and council due to closed meeting rules under negotiation. That led to a lot of criticism from those opposed to the sale.

"I've been disappointed with the vitriol that's been directed at Council and staff," he said.

Public comments during open forum that day criticized the lack of information about the conditional sale and expressed foreboding about the effect of development on the Beaver Valley.

Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy put in an offer at a higher price point, several speakers mentioned. It was noted later in the meeting that the conservancy offer came after the municipality had accepted Westway's conditional offer.

In the months prior to that, no offers had been received.

In a later interview, Bob Barnett president of the EBC said in his view the land's destiny should be decided based on the naturalized state it is in today, — not judged by its past use. "I think we should be looking at it with new eyes," he said.

At the meeting, Coun. Cathy Little said that the property is rare in the Niagara Escarpment in having a Recreation designation. That designation has permitted uses that allow development but balance it with environmental needs, she said.

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Councillor Little, along with Coun. Allwood and the Mayor had ongoing discussions with Westway Capital about the municipality's priorities.

Ms Little is a strong advocate on council for the environment and a past chair of the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority.

"I respect the care that council has taken," she said last Wednesday. "I am feeling quite optimistic."

Coun. Little observed that the Talisman property has for years been seen as a missed opportunity for the community. The lands only ended up in municipal hands due to back taxes and foreclosure, she observed.

Broadening the tax base will relieve the financial burden on the municipality and all ratepayers, she said.

"I am very sorry that people have been negatively emotionally impacted by this," she said. "But we're doing what we think is right and what will have positive impact on the municipality."

Councillors stressed that any development will have to meet setbacks and other stipulations by the NEC, the Conservation Authority and local and County Official Plans.

Upper Talisman (golf course lands) are zoned Development. Much of Lower Talisman cannot be developed with the exception of land beside and behind existing houses on Lanktree Drive and also across the internal driveway from the main Talisman buildings.

Coun. Tom Allwood said he was confident that the development would go forward with respect for the beauty of the land and also contribute to a vibrant community.

Coun. Paul Allen spoke of his own ties to the municipality and next generations of his own family choosing to live here: "I'm not going to make decisions that I think will deter people like that from staying in Grey Highlands or coming back to Grey Highlands."

The CAO commended council for moving forward taking into account 'not just one area... but all the hard-working taxpayers who live in the community.'

The original Talisman resort was forced into bankruptcy in 2011, owing millions in back taxes and unpaid water and sewer fees.

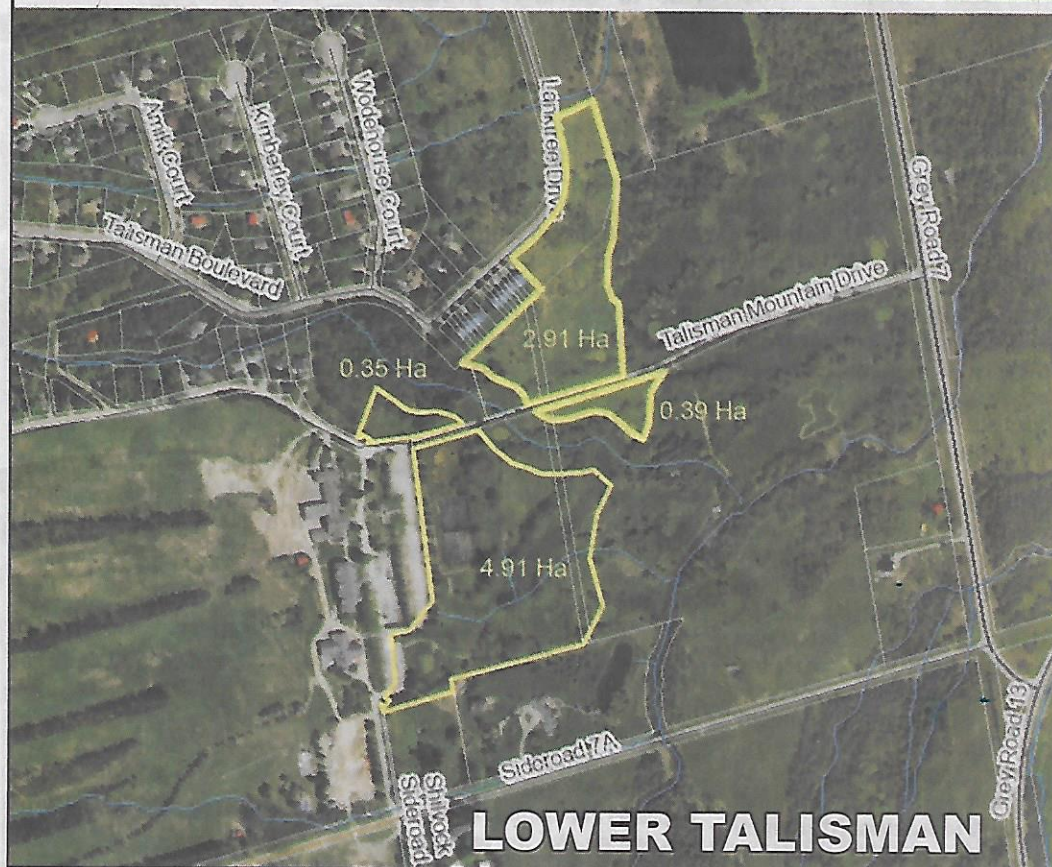
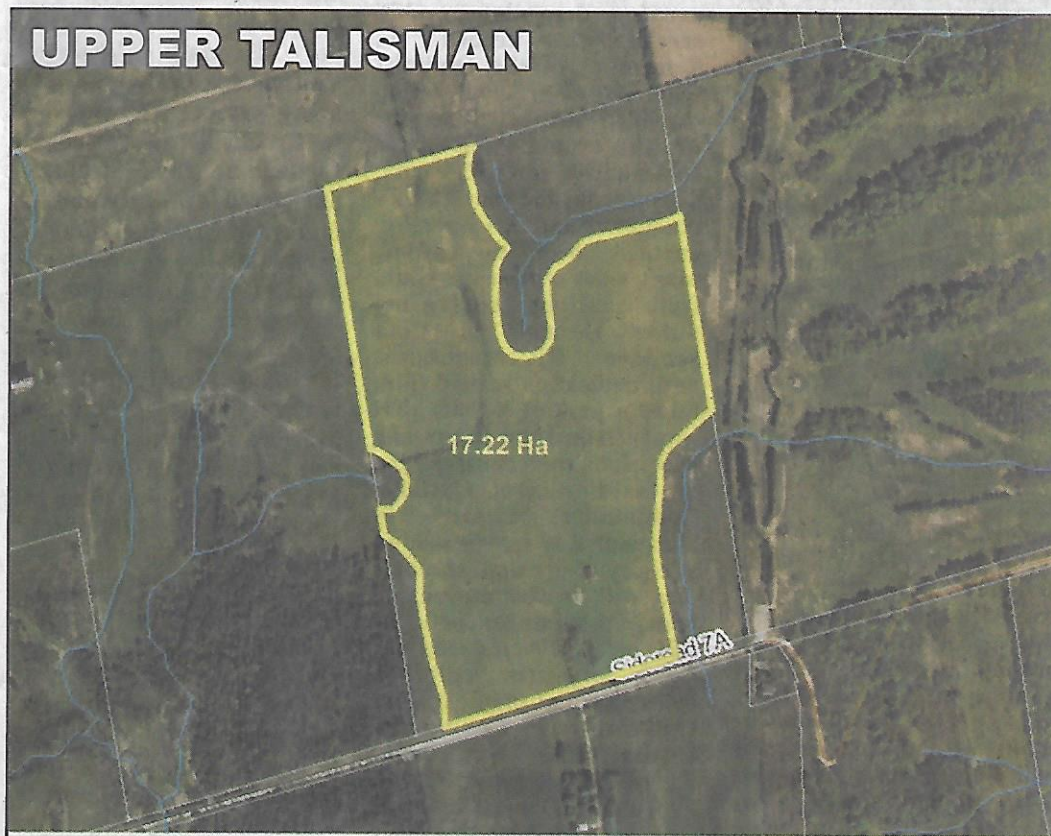
Mr. Ellis and Mr. Calvano purchased the property in May, 2014 from Grey Highlands for \$1.8 million. The municipality had failed to dispose of it through two tax sales.

The purchase agreement called for \$1 million down payment and the municipality to take back a mortgage for the remaining \$800,000 which would be paid at a rate of \$100,000 a year for eight years.

That restoration foundered when bills for restoration were higher than ever, and municipal water charges added which apply even during closure added to the burden.

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UPPER TALISMAN



LOWER TALISMAN

UPPER & LOWER TALISMAN – The maps of the two parcels sold by bylaw to Westway Capital are from the Municipality of Grey Highlands website, and indicate in yellow the parts of those properties which are “developable lands.”

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