

Conservationist group aims to have voice heard in Talisman redevelopment conversation

By Greg Cowan



The former Talisman Resort opened in 1963 and employed over 300 workers at its peak.

The Escarpment Corridor Alliance has joined a growing number of community groups and conservationists looking to make their voices heard concerning the redevelopment of the former Talisman Resort properties near Kimberly in the Beaver Valley.

But the land they are hoping to help shape a future for is privately owned, leaving little room for arm twisting by the public.

The not-for-profit organization formed nearly two years ago aims to protect a 51,000-hectare area they call the Escarpment Corridor, from the Blue Mountains above Collingwood to the Beaver Valley. The group's board is made up of former land trust CEOs, lawyers and board members, the former leader of marketing and economic development for the Town of Collingwood, and two of the principals who led the 2004 Ontario Municipal Board "battle" against development in the Castle Glen area of Blue Mountains.

Earlier this month, the ECA hosted a visioning workshop at the Flesherton Kinxplex where over 100 people came together for a workshop led by a consultant from Public City Architects and Landscape Architects.

It's there citizens expressed an interest in the sustainable redevelopment of the hotel on the property while keeping the rest of the land open for light recreational purposes.

"There's a real public interest in determining what should or should not happen at that entire property," said Stephen Griggs, chair of the ECA.

Brian Ellis and his partners own the former hotel property that includes the resort buildings – known as the Talisman Springs Inn. Ellis was in attendance at the visioning session.

Representatives from Westway Capital were not at the meeting. The Greater Toronto Area developers purchased the upper Talisman lands and former golf course at the resort for \$2.5 million from the Municipality of Grey Highlands in 2022.

“They’ve had no interest in communicating with us or any other members of the community that we’re aware of,” said Griggs.

The owners of the upper Talisman and golf course properties, a combined 55 hectares at the former resort site, have created an entity called the Beaver Valley Development Group led by Paul Golini.

Paul Mondell, who has previously worked as a vice president with Skyline Investments, the resort company with Blue Mountain Village in its portfolio, is the head of development and planning for the firm.

At a Nov. 15 Grey Highlands council meeting Mondell told councillors the BVDG have held public consultations detailing their plans for the two parcels. Still, the conversations were mostly negative in tone and sentiment.

Mondell said the BVDG met twice with a 25-member committee and hosted several open-house sessions.

“There was an attempt on our part to have a fulsome discussion with members of the community and discuss what was important to them. It was a sincere attempt on our part to do that, however the last session that we had, really, degraded into name calling and a real uncivilized display that I’ve, really, never witnessed in my career,” Mondell said.

Attempts to reach members of the BVDG for this story were unsuccessful.

Neither the BVDG nor Ellis’ group have submitted formal planning applications to the Municipality of Grey Highlands, and CAO Karen Govan said she cannot predict when applications may be made.

On its website, the BVDG said it wants to build “much-needed” infrastructure at the site, as well as a mix of housing choices including investor units and a managed rental program, and create spaces for recreational-based activities with a health and wellness focus.

In 2021, Westway Capital told councillors during a special council meeting it intended to build 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.”

At that time, the municipality and Ellis were part of a joint-venture agreement in 2020 to market the lands to prospective buyers. Westway Capital eventually waived a condition in the agreement of purchase and sale with the municipality stating a deal between Westway and Ellis’ company needed to be reached before closing on the parcels owned by the municipality.

Ellis could not be reached for comment. Griggs said Ellis has plans to redevelop the hotel at the resort property.

The ECA has partnered with Friends of the Beaver Valley, the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, and the Protecting Talisman Lands Association in its fight against overdevelopment at the Talisman property.

The Protecting Talisman Lands Association took the Municipality of Grey Highlands to court in 2022 to halt the sale of the municipally owned Talisman lands to Westway.

A Superior Court of Justice in Owen Sound dismissed the case.

The ECA asserts the municipality rejected a higher offer from the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy at the time of the sale to Westway. The EBC offered \$2.775 million for the municipally owned lands.

Govan said the municipality sold the land for more than the independently appraised value (\$1.27 million).

“Council were well into negotiations with the current owners when the second offer came in and when that offer was presented to council it was contingent on fundraising the purchase price. Council chose to continue with the offer they were negotiating,” Govan said in an e-mail.

Griggs said the ECA intends to ensure Grey Highlands council has up-to-date environmental studies and information regarding the Talisman properties so they can make a fully informed decision on any planning applications made at the site.

“One of the challenges municipalities have now under new rules from the Ford government is that once a developer has submitted their proposal, the municipality has a very short period of time to make a decision,” Griggs said. “There are all kinds of environmental studies and reports to be done, and if a developer does them they need to be peer-reviewed. That takes a great deal of time.”

He points to a seemingly innocuous stream on the property that actually might cause a big headache for a developer given the municipality’s official plan.

“It turns out that small stream is actually a trout stream and under the official plan for Grey Highlands a trout stream needs a setback of 120 metres on either side of it. So, that alone, that kind of a setback, would eliminate most of the area the owners of that property are proposing to develop within,” Griggs said.

He said there are also issues with developing on property near the Wodehouse Karst Management area, an area made up of porous limestone with water run-off eventually ending up in the Beaver River.

“It’s very difficult to build on and you certainly don’t want road salts and other chemicals to find a way into karst system and find its way into the Beaver River,” Griggs said.

Griggs said the municipality should also look into updating a study to define a water protection area for the Amik-Talisman water system that serves the resort area and a nearby community. The system consists of two raw water springs and a conventional filtration packaged plant. A storage reservoir provides water via a pumped and gravity water main.

Griggs said when an initial study was done it was noted any development in the area would require a more significant study to determine the water protection area.

“If I lived in Amik or in Kimberly I would be really ticked off if a development was allowed there without knowing that my water was safe,” he said.

Furthermore, the Talisman lands are subject to the control of the Niagara Escarpment Commission under the Niagara Escarpment Planning and Development Act.

Westway Capital previously said it had initiated early discussions with the Niagara Escarpment Commission, the Grey Sauble Conservation Authority and the Bruce Trail Conservancy “to ensure our plans align with their objectives and integrate into the natural environment”.

The Talisman Resort opened in 1963 and operated as a ski hill, golf course and vacation spot until ceasing operations in 2009. The municipality took over the property in 2013 after it developed over \$2 million in tax arrears and sat abandoned and deteriorating.

At that point, the municipality severed the Upper Talisman portion and sold the rest to Ellis and his partners' numbered company. The municipality once again took possession of the former golf course lands when Ellis ran into financial trouble.

High taxes and expensive water bills stalled the Ellis; efforts to redevelop the resort property.

Govan said both properties are currently in good standing with their respective utility and property tax accounts.

(End of article).