

'Not the right fit': Grey County residents decry proposed Beaver Valley development

GREG COWAN

Many Grey County residents spoke in opposition to a proposed resort village development in the Beaver Valley at a meeting Wednesday night.

The Beaver Valley Development Group (BVDG) aims to construct a sprawling community where people can "live, work and play" at the former Talisman Mountain Resort north of Kimberley in Grey Highlands. Seeking to build up to 370 homes on part of the property, the development could make the former resort property one of the largest population centres in the municipality.

Detractors say if the development is constructed as envisioned by the company, the protected Beaver Valley escarpment corridor will be home to the next Blue Mountain Village and result in a paradigm shift in both local and provincial planning policies throughout the UNESCO Niagara Escarpment Biosphere Reserve.

"It's a complete failure of imagination," said Grey Highlands resident Ana Serrano.

Meanwhile, the company and local government maintain the property that was once home to one of Ontario's largest ski resorts is meant to be a tourist destination and development of the property has been a long time coming.

Grey County organized Wednesday night's public meeting to seek comment on BVDG's proposed plan of subdivision. The plan is the first official step which seeks approval by local officials in what's likely to be a years-long planning process before any shovels hit the ground.

Before the public commenting period, which was capped at three hours, municipal planners and a representative for the BVDG talked through three different slide presentations describing the company's application, some of the technical planning elements, and a broad potential vision for the property.

Owen Sound
Sun Times
Sat
6/15/24

Pg 1 of 2

Grey County planner Scott Taylor tried to anticipate the public's concerns by answering frequently asked questions. Development at the property has been a hotly contested issue since the municipally owned properties at the former resort were put up for sale. Public opposition intensified when the BVDG purchased two parcels and detailed plans for an eco-tourism resort village.

"This is not a referendum on development," Taylor said before the public commenting period, reminding the public the property is zoned for residential development in both the county and Grey Highlands official plans, and specifically marketed to developers as such.

Nearly 50 people spoke over the three-hour timeframe. Concerns ranged from traffic congestion, sewage capacity, build density, and the location of storm ponds. Several commenters discussed the potential harm a large-scale development could have on the protected escarpment landscape. Others noted the development is proposed to be built at a location "in the middle of nowhere", a 20-minute drive to the nearest population centre with a school, hospital or grocery store. Some wondered who would pick up the tab for any increased infrastructure costs associated with the proposed development.

There were concerns about the development brightening the night sky, given nearby dark sky observation centres, and about how the development would affect several at-risk species that call the area home.

At times, residents became emotional as they described generations of ancestors who called the Beaver Valley home and fought to protect the landscape.

SEE TALISMAN ON A2

County staff to review public comments

TALISMAN FROM A1

Or those who moved here more recently who said the development threatens the ideals that led them to choose to live in the area.

Residents representing the Escarpment Corridor Alliance, the Protecting Talisman group and the Niagara Escarpment Foundation spoke against the development as currently envisioned.

All except for two speakers who supported the proposal pleaded with the local politicians to deny the developer's application.

Stacie Howe owns The General Store in Kimberley. She said people who visit their quaint village nestled in the escarpment valley do so because of its remote natural beauty. She contested the need for a large-scale development in the area.

"We're already vital," she said. "We see how much there is to lose and we want to share what's special about the valley."

The BVDG's proposed plan of subdivision is for a 31-hectare parcel of land below the former Talisman Mountain Resort ski hill.

The BVDG owns another 24-hectare parcel above the ski hill. Another developer, Brian Ellis and his partners, own the ski hill and former resort buildings.

Neither of those properties are subject to planning applications at this time, though several people who spoke Wednesday said Ellis intends to redevelop the hotel at the property.

The application in question Wednesday night seeks to create individual blocks of land for recreational, residential, future development, natural heritage and natural heritage/open space on the 31-hectare parcel. If approved by the county, no individual residential or commercial lots will be created. The company will need to submit future development applications to create individual lots if the block plan is approved by the

county.

In a report, the company notes a block subdivision plan — more of a high-level, bird's-eye-view conceptualization when compared to a typical plan of subdivision — is a tool used when it is anticipated the development will take place over time and allows for more flexibility in responding to ongoing or future changes in the market, demographics, or economic conditions.

The residential and mixed-use blocks detailed in the plan could yield 370 residential units. For context, the community of Markdale — Grey Highlands' largest population centre — is listed as having 598 private dwellings in the 2021 census.

The area proposed for development lies within the provincially protected Niagara Escarpment Plan (NEP) but is designated as an Escarpment Recreation Area, which allows residential, commercial and recreational use.

According to the NEP, Escarpment Recreation Areas are considered areas of existing or potential recreational development associated with the escarpment. Such areas may include both seasonal and permanent residences.

Opponents say the BVDG is trying to use a legacy loophole to build a "small town" at the property.

In a letter to councillors and county staff, resident Paul Woolner said that back when the Talisman Mountain Resort was one of the largest ski operations in southern Ontario, an allowance for recreational housing at the site was "grandfathered" despite much of the area falling into the highest protection rating in the Niagara Escarpment Plan — Canada's first large-scale environmental land-use plan seeking to protect up to 195,000 hectares of escarpment corridor.

"The current reality is of course that the Talisman site is no more a recreational site than any other lands in the Beaver Valley. But it

is still zoned for some recreational housing. However, large housing subdivisions and commercial development on a long-defunct ski resort when all adjacent surrounding lands have the highest protection afforded by the act is neither consistent with the purposes of the NEP nor the spirit of the NEP," Woolner wrote.

During the public commenting period, Woolner said approving the BVDG's plan would set a poor precedent for any future development along the escarpment corridor.

During the BVDG's presentation Wednesday night, conducted by associate planner Arthur Grabowski of The Planning Partnership, the company announced discussions with CNIB to collaborate and review opportunities to build Canada's first year-round inclusive and accessible leisure property at the site.

Shane Burt, CNIB's director of philanthropy, discussed the opportunities being looked at by the two parties, including a potential gift of land at the property to the CNIB.

Grey County staff will now review the public comments received and work on a report to present to Grey County council at a future meeting.

In May 2022, Grey Highlands and Westway Capital (Beaver Valley Development Group) closed on a \$2.5 million deal for the municipally-owned lands at the former Talisman Resort property.

In the land deal, Westway Capital agreed to pay \$1 million for a 59-acre parcel overlooking the former ski hill, then called "Upper Talisman", and \$1.5 million for the resort's former golf course referred to as Lower Talisman.

Visit www.grey.ca/government/land-use-planning/active-development and navigate to the Beaver Valley Development Group Subdivision in the Municipality of Grey Highlands for more information.

Thanks
Real
E
Gall