

Village considering alternate plan

Land swap big part of newest plans

BY ALEX RICE

Published: September 10th, 2009, Mineral County Miner, Page 1

WOLF CREEK - The developer of the controversial Village at Wolf Creek is currently looking into the viability of an alternate plan that would be friendlier to the environment and make the Village less visible.

The new alternate plan for the Village, to be located near Wolf Creek Ski Area, calls for a land exchange between developer B.J. "Red" McCombs of Leavell-McCombs Joint Ventures and the Rio Grande National Forest, and also includes a smaller first phase of development, the Village's growing with the ski area and direct access from Highway 160.

The land exchange would involve the Village trading 207 acres it currently owns for 207 acres closer to the highway, but less visible due to tree cover. The land exchange would also get the development off delicate wetland areas, since the planned Village's location on such environmentally-sensitive areas has been a sticking point between developers and various environmental groups.

The new plan entails a first phase of 492 units, including one hotel and five condo buildings and a total of 1,700 units once the development is completed. That number is down from the 2,200 units the past plans include.

The necessities of going through the approval processes of both Congress and the United States Forest Service in order to green-light the alternate plan could also involve the project taking two to four more years than expected, but Clint Jones, a representative for McCombs, said that, "Red might consider going that route even though it's a longer process."

Jones said that the Village would pursue both simultaneously so as to save time, but stressed, "hopefully it would shorten the time period, but that doesn't mean we're skipping any part of the process."

The land exchange would be subject to a federally-mandated appraisal process and would also undergo the review process of the National Environmental Protection Act. It would also likely need the support of Congressman John Salazar, a San Luis Valley native, in the U.S. House of Representatives to move forward.

Also, as part of the new plan, an on-ramp and an off-ramp would be constructed for motorists entering and exiting the Village.

Jones reported that, in the past 10 months, he has met with representatives from Colorado Wild, the SLV Ecosystem Council and SLV Wetlands Focus Area Committee, among others. "I think everybody agrees that the land exchange is a good idea."

Wolf Creek Ski Area owner Davey Pitcher, who has locked horns with McCombs more than once over the planned Village, is in support of the land exchange and the alternate plan as a whole.

In a written statement, Pitcher called the plan "a vast improvement over the prior proposal in terms of wetland protection and less interference with skiing."

"What we want to do is grow with Davey," said Jones. "We recognize the need to be of a size comparable to what the mountain can hold today, and if the mountain grows, we have the potential to build with it."

The above isn't the only option, though. The developer can still continue with the original plan that has already been approved by Mineral County, a plan for which environmental assessments need to be completed. Either way, those involved with the Village would like to know which path they're taking within the next couple of months.

"Red wants to know one way or the other by the time snow falls so we can get started," said Jones, who emphasized that a decision will be made - having no Village at Wolf Creek whatsoever "is not one of the options."