

Plan relies on successful land exchange

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A revised development plan from Village at Wolf Creek developers depicts a scaled back 2,172 units down to 491 units in phase one —and village point men say the revision, co proposed land exchange, will allow for development compatible with the ski area and a environmental impact on the Alberta Park area. They also say development, of some kind is imminent.

“We really have two alternatives, the old plan and getting road access, or the new plan with the land exchange. Some groups would like to not have any development here and that’s not realistic for me,” said new village point man, Clint Jones, executive vice president of Hal Jones Development LLC. “Red and his daughter, Marsha, are committed to this project.”

Jones was referring to Texas billionaire Billy Joe “Red” McCombs who, along with Leavitt Inc., and later Leavell-McCombs Joint Venture, have been working toward realization of a village at Wolf Creek since approval of a U.S. Forest Service land exchange in 1986.

Since 1986, McCombs’ proposal to build a 10,000-person ski village on a 287.5-acre parcel in the Alberta Park area adjacent to Wolf Creek Ski Area has been fraught with numerous challenges among them: year-round access issues to the private inholding surrounded by the Rio Grande National Forest; access issues to U.S. 160, as articulated by the Colorado Department of Transportation (CDOT); myriad environmental concerns including wetlands and lynx habitat from area environmental groups (Colorado Wild and the San Luis Valley Ecosystem Coalition); a lawsuit with the Pitcher family, owners of Wolf Creek Ski Area; allegations that McCombs attempted to unduly pressure or influence Forest Service personnel and contractors; and court rulings which tossed out Mineral County’s approval of the project and the Forest Service environmental impact statement — two rulings which set the project back to ground zero. Court battles, judicial rulings and CDOT approvals aside however, it appears, per Jones that wetlands remain the village’s Achilles heel — hence the recent request for a second land exchange. “There may be more advantageous reasons for us being there,” Jones said, referring to the land he hoped to acquire through the exchange. “The most glaring reason is us getting out of there. According to Jones, the desire is to exchange 207 acres of existing Village-owned land situated in and around Alberta Park and the lower half of the waterfall area for 207 acres of land northeast of Alberta Park with frontage to U.S. 160.

Jones said wetlands make up about half the property they want to give up, and aside from wetlands issues, the exchange would add skiable terrain to the area, and may ease CDOT concerns regarding the Village’s access on to U.S. 160. Jones also said a successful exchange would allow him to build a “quaint, pedestrian-style village that is compatible with the ski area,”

to the oft-criticized 10,000-person mountain metropolis plan currently on file with Mineral County. The Mineral County Board of County Commissioners are one of the final arbiters in Village decisions.

Pointing to the new plan's specifics, Jones said the number of proposed units — 491 at the time — was derived from conversations with Davey Pitcher, regarding how many additional skiers the mountain could accommodate, and demonstrates an effort to build a project that is tied to Pitcher's expansion on the mountain.

"The concept didn't start with, 'How can I make this easier on myself.' This concept came from the person who is the most knowledgeable on the mountain," Jones said.

In fact, to demonstrate synchronicity between the village and the ski area, Jones presented a letterhead signed by Pitcher on ski area letterhead, stating the ski area supported "a land trade that returns those resources back into public ownership. With respect to the current proposal, we applaud the landowners for committing to the follow the full environmental review process to determine if this proposal is in the public interest."

Pitcher's comments, Jones said, are congruous with public sentiment surrounding the land exchange in that it's not the land exchange per se, but the process in which the developer goes about it. According to Jones, he embarked on two land exchange tracks — a legislative track, with the sponsorship of Congressman John Salazar and would ultimately require congressional approval, and an administrative track through the Forest Service land exchange process.

In either case, Jones said, "Whether we go through Congress or the Forest Service, we will go through a full public process."

Jones explained the congressional track may provide greater predictability over the outcome of the land exchange and the success of the Village project in general. Thus, public support for the legislative track may instill confidence in McCombs to give Jones the green light to proceed with smaller scale village plans. Nevertheless, Jones said, pursuing a land exchange, administratively or congressionally, is largely contingent on three factors: McCombs' patience, Salazar's willingness to carry the land exchange torch through Congress, and public sentiment.

"Red has a plan which Mineral County approved. The Forest Service has come out publicly in support of Red has access to the property," Jones said. Both factors, Jones explained, should the county support a land exchange, may make it appealing for McCombs to launch the original project as planned, and he added the project clock is ticking.

"I think the decision is going to have to be made pretty soon. I'd like to get started with the environmental review," Jones said.

According to Jones, he has met with Salazar, although Jones reported the congressman will decide whether he will sponsor land exchange legislation.

As of Tuesday, Archuleta County Commissioner Bob Moomaw said he had also been in

Salazar's staff, and anticipated a decision from Salazar later in the week.

As a commissioner, Moomaw has lobbied against the Village project since taking office has used his position to access political heavy hitters such as Salazar, who, at various times entered the Village fray.

To that end, Moomaw fired off a letter to Rep. Salazar last week, with Archuleta County commissioners Clifford Lucero and John Ranson consenting, lambasting the developer's exchange proposal and accusing Jones and Leavell-McCombs Joint Venture of engaging clandestine tactics designed to circumvent the public process.

An electronic analysis of the letter indicates Ryan Demmy Bidwell, executive director of Colorado Wild, and one of the staunchest opponents of the village project, penned the letter, not his board colleagues.

When asked about the electronic fingerprint linking the letter to Bidwell, not to Moomaw or other commissioners, Moomaw said, "He (Bidwell) provided basic facts. I sent an e-mail to Todd Starr (Attorney Todd Starr), saying 'Here's a draft,' but that e-mail never got there. The fact of the matter is I called him (Bidwell) to send a draft. The breakdown was that the e-mail didn't get to Todd Starr. Based on commissioner comments during a Tuesday meeting, the breakdown was also that commissioners Lucero and Ranson — didn't know Bidwell was the source for the letter. "It frustrates me because I didn't want to sign a letter from those guys (Colorado Wild)," "When I approved it last week, I assumed I would sign it and see it before it went out. Now the question is how do we move forward, because I don't want to be tied into those guys. We should have a letter saying what our people think. I guess this one bothered me because I asked not to sign it and hadn't seen it."

According to Ranson and Lucero's comments, and a review of the document, the letter does not have Moomaw's signature, and neither Lucero or Ranson reviewed the letter prior to its delivery to Salazar.

"If we're going to send a letter, we all need to sign it. I should have read it closer. I got it before the meeting. We made a mistake and we have to fess up," Lucero said.

Although it is unclear what impact Bidwell's role in writing the letter will have on Salazar's decision, the correspondence, Moomaw said he simply sought one of the most knowledgeable and respected voices on an issue of great importance to him and many Archuleta County residents.

"Small counties plagiarize a lot," Moomaw said.

According to Jones and Moomaw, Salazar's decision on sponsorship, will likely dictate future moves.

As for Archuleta County, Salazar's sponsorship may give cause for the commissioners to have discussions with commissioners in Mineral, Rio Grande and Hinsdale counties.

Internally, the Archuleta County Board of County Commissioners set policy Tuesday on how to handle correspondence in the future.