

Crowd overflows map hearing

January 24, 2003

By RaeLynn Gill

There was no room at the Inn on Wednesday when crowds showed up to comment on Hood River County's draft destination resort map.

About 100 would-be speakers were forced to huddle under the eaves of the Gorge Room at the Hood River Inn to avoid the cold winter rain because the facility was already packed to its maximum capacity of 275 persons. Twenty of these individuals braced against the elements long enough to gain a warm seat after their peers inside had given testimony and left the premises.

Prior to the Jan. 22 hearing, the Cooper Spur Wild and Free Coalition passed out more than 200 "Tell Us The Truth" tags to audience members. Heather Weinstein, chair of the Coalition, said the campaign message was not directed against any single individual or entity. Recreationist and environmental groups from across the state formed the group in July to fight against any new Mt. Hood Meadows, Ltd., development. They are also opposed to the map including about 70 acres of the Cooper Spur Inn property purchased in 2001.

Planning Commission Chair Bill Lyons laid out strict ground rules for behavior over the potentially divisive issue that also drew a busload of Meadows supporters, although many people were denied entrance since the doors opened 60 minutes before the hearing and seating was taken by the time they arrived. Lyons also pointed out to both sides of the issue the presence of Sheriff Joe Wampler and a deputy who would be called upon if needed.

"No jeering, cheering or other behavior you would see at a football game," said Lyons, who allowed people to raise their hands instead of applause to show agreement with a speaker.

He also reminded the crowd that the legislative hearing was not centered on any one destination resort – there are currently no plans on the table – but on the overall inventory of possible sites. However, in spite of that prompt, the focus of the evening clearly revolved around Meadows' stated intent to build a new destination resort.

During pro and con presentations by expert witnesses, both sides disagreed with the interpretation of data by the consulting team of Cogan, Owens, Cogan that was used to qualify sites for the maps. Of particular focus was the inclusion of Mt. Hood National Forest zones and the criteria used to determine commercial farm areas that are legally protected by a three-mile buffer from any resort development.

Jurgen Hess, speaking on behalf of the Coalition and his Columbia Gorge Institute, said the county had questionable authority to include federal property since it had no ability to regulate land-use in those sectors. He questioned the reversal of the consultant's recommendation not to include forest zones. He said it appeared that move had been made to accommodate Meadows' suggestion that including these tracts would expedite the private development of land acquired

through a property exchange. He said that issue would be best addressed during the periodic review process that would take place between five and 15 years after a map was adopted.

However, Mike Benedict, county planning director, had informed the Commission at a recent work session that state budget deficits could suspend the review process indefinitely.

For that reason, Dave Riley, Meadows general manager, pointed out that the county should follow state law that does not exclude National Forest from resort eligibility. He also said that U.S. Forest Service had not objected to having the property they manage listed on the county map.

Mike McCarthy, a member of both the Coalition and the Hood River Valley Residents Committee, one of its affiliates, said some of his family property, located in the same vicinity as the Meadows' property, was incorrectly excluded as the starting point of a three-mile buffer zone to protect commercial farm lands in the area. He said the county's mapping process had disqualified 30-40 percent of the orchards in the area that were the sole livelihood of their owners.

Under Oregon law, resorts allowed until Goal 8 of state land use rules cannot be located within three miles of "high value" crop areas. These operations must be part of a concentration of commercial farms that are capable of harvests that produce a minimum annual gross income of \$1,000 per acre.

"As you might expect there's another side to this story," said Riley before producing documentation to show that the McCarthy property did not currently meet the state income guidelines.

In addition, he said the data would clearly show that one Christmas tree farm, some pasture land and two tree fruit operations near the Meadows property were mistakenly listed as commercial enterprises without meeting the necessary requirements. Based on that research, Riley contended that Meadows was actually eligible to have 200 acres included on the draft county resort map.

The economic benefits and detriment brought by construction of a destination resort were also argued between the Coalition and Meadows.

Kathy Semmes of Mt. Hood, one of the Coalition's five presenters, asked the Commission not to be lulled by Meadows' "smoke screen" that the facility would solve the county's financial problems. She pointed that during the past 15 years Hood River had grown rapidly with similar businesses and services to accommodate tourists but still had high unemployment rates and many underpaid workers.

"Hood River is already a destination resort, another one in the county would only detract economically and environmentally," said Peter Cornelison, a Hood River resident and Coalition representative.

In turn, Riley brought forward his paid consultant, Robert Whelan of ECONorthwest. Whelan outlined that, based on his research, an "isolated attraction" would complement other area businesses by encouraging the growth of tourism. He said since five resorts were built in Deschutes County the payroll employment had climbed 662 percent, with the average wages almost \$5,000 a year higher than those in Hood River. In addition, Riley pointed out that, based on

Whelan's data, property tax revenue would climb from the current \$10,000 per year to between \$1.5 - \$2 million – securing more money for local schools and services.

"The more spending from outsiders of the county that any project brings in, the more the local economy is going to be stimulated," said Whelan.

The Coalition and many of its supporters testified that development of the Meadows property would degrade the deer and elk migration corridor that linked their winter and summer ranges.

Riley countered those arguments by turning the podium over to biologist Rob Dillinger, a consultant with Natural Resource Planning Services, Inc., hired to evaluate big game habitat on Meadows' property. Dillinger said he had confirmed state reports showing that elk and deer did not rely strongly on the Cooper Spur parcel for passage. In addition, he presented maps outlining the conservation easements that Meadows planned to include in its future development to accommodate area wildlife and protect riparian areas.

Other dissenters of the future Meadows' plans shared worries that development in the rural sector of the county would threaten the Crystal Springs Watershed that supplies 25 percent of the county drinking and irrigation water.

Riley countered those claims with statements that his company had no intention of harming the environment and suggested the county hire an independent hydrologist when Meadows presented its plans to delineate the actual watershed boundaries for mitigation purposes.

In the hour allotted for public opinion after the expert witnesses had spoken, 19 people spoke out against Meadows' plans and three supported the possible development. At least half of these individuals were from the Portland-metro area.