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Meadows owners plan new resort on Mt. Hood

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By Peter Sleeth

A call to draw tourists to one of the mountain's last accessible spots is likely to set off one of the fiercest battles in decades

Parkdale – A Portland business wants to develop a major gold and ski resort community on the northeast flank of Mount Hood, in what could be the largest development on the mountain in more than 30 years.

The sweeping move is drawing intense criticism in the Hood River Valley even before any concrete plans have been put on the table.

The owners of Mt. Hood Meadows Ski Resort want to convert the sleepy Cooper Spur Skil and Recreation Area into a resort unlike anything seen before on the mountain.

It could have as many as 450 homes, hotel rooms and condominiums, an ice rink, retail village and restaurants. It is an attempt by Mt. Hood Meadows to bring a year-round resort to Mount Hood on both federal and adjoining private lands, an elusive quest the ski areas's principal owner, Franklin Drake, has long sought.

The fight is already shaping up to be one of the most contentious on the mountain since Mt. Hood Meadows was founded in the 1960s.

The Hood River Valley Residents Committee and Friends of Mt. Hood oppose the resort, and the land-use watchdog group 1000 Friends of Oregon is monitoring any land-use decision made outside the forest. Last week, the hiking and climbing group The Mazamas decided to oppose the resort's development, bringing the weight of its 3,000 members to bear.

"You don't have to build golf courses up that high; certainly, you can build golf courses elsewhere," said Mazamas' President Doug Wilson. "It's a pristine backcountry experience up there. We're worried about losing that."

The question of how to manage the 12.1 million-acre Mount Hood National Forest and the private land surrounding its boundaries becomes more critical annually as an estimated 4 million visitors flock to its slopes. Every year, damage mounts from too many people on too few acres. At the same time, the U.S. Forest Service has less money to spend on building ski trails, campsites or lodges to accommodate visitors.

That growth pressures continue to crowd the mountain is without question. Timberline ski area is in the early stages of obtaining permission to add a ski lift at its resort. Mt. Hood Meadows is planning an expansion with four new lifts and a mountainside restaurant. And more people are using the entire federal forest than ever.

"You have to recognize they are coming to the mountain," said Dave Riley, manager of Mt. Hood Meadows, and point man for the Cooper Spur development. "You want have to build a fence around the mountain to keep them out."

At the same time, pear and apple farms blanket the Hood river Valley just outside the forest's boundaries, and within a few miles of the proposed resort. Some fear new development could endanger farmers already struggling with low fruit prices by pushing up land values.

"we think it's important to save," said Kate McCarthy, whose family came to the Hood River Valley in 1908. "You cannot complete with resort development."

Acquiring more property

Cooper Spur today is a small resort primarily used by locals.

It has only a rope tow and T-bar to move skiers uphill, rather than more expensive ski lifts. Its terrain is mostly for novice and intermediate skiers and does not compete with more challenging slopes found at Mt. Hood Meadows, a scant 12 miles away. The road leading past Cooper Spur is the main entrance to the more remote, timberline areas of the north face of Mount Hood, an area favored by mountain climbers and hikes.

To be sure, the Cooper Spur development faces hurdles in complying with Oregon land-use laws on the private portion of the development, as well as obtaining Forest Service approval for developing the ski area.

Even the scope of the plans for Cooper Spur are a closely held secret.

"To be honest with you, I don't know (the scope). I'm looking at a lot of alternatives," Riley said. "I'm trying to take a kind-and-gentle approach that takes in the needs and desires of the residents of Hood River County."

What Riley and Meadows North LLC, the development's parent company, have done is this:

- In July 2001, the company purchased the privately held Cooper Spur Lodge. It included 157 acres, a restaurant, lodge and cabins, all on private land adjacent to the national forest.
- That month, the company purchased the lease for the 1400-acre Cooper Spur ski area. The ski area is on federal land and is leased by the Forest Service to Meadows North.
- In September 2001, Riley met with about 40 area homeowners, telling them about plans for the golf course, ice rink and homes.
- In December, 2001, Meadows North exchanged land with Hood River County. Meadows acquired 620 acres of private forest land next to the Cooper Spur Lodge property, enlarging Meadows private holdings in the area to about 800 acres.
- In February, the company received permission from Hood River County to create cross-country ski trails in the 157 acres of land surrounding Cooper Spur Lodge.
- Also last month, the company applied to the Forest Service for permission to build a ski lift at the Cooper Spur Ski area, one of four ski lifts Riley has mentioned as possibilities at the site. The Forest Service is considering changing the boundaries of the ski area so ski lifts could extend up to the 5,500 foot level of the mountain. Currently, ski operations at Cooper Spur are on about 50 acres of land below 4,500 feet.

Even though Meadows North will not commit to a finished plan for the area, Riley has made clear a development is on the way.

"In fairness, there is public, common knowledge that Meadows has some development proposal in mind," said David Meriwether, Hood river County administrator, who has seen plans for the golf course development. "But there has been no proposal (to Hood River County) yet."

A touchy question

Any large-scale development in or near the Mount Hood National Forest brings up a touchy question: What gets developed on a mountain that many Oregonians consider near-sacred?

Development on Mount Hood historically has been steered to the south side of the mountain along U.S. 26, with Government Camp as the locus. Cooper Spur, however, is on the northeastern side of the mountain, far from most commercial activities.

Drake and his ski area have long campaigned for overnight housing at Mt. Hood Meadows, but the Forest Service has refused to allow it.

In 1997, then-forest supervisor Roberta Moltzen allowed the ski area to grow, but only within its boundaries and without overnight lodging. In the 1970s, the ski area purchased land in the Hood River Valley in hopes of developing a year-round resort. That property is part of the land exchange with Hood River County.

Although the Forest Service has taken no position on development at Cooper Spur, all this comes at a time when the Mount Hood National Forest has less money spend on recreation than at any time in the past 10 years. With the demise of most logging in the forest, Forest Service budgets have shrunk from \$48 million in 1990 to \$22 million this year.

"The Forest Service is struggling because we don't have the money to provide the recreation to the Portland area," said Kim Titus, district ranger for the Hood River Ranger District.

For that matter, the Forest Service lacks the money to even maintain forest health in areas where large numbers of dead trees are a fire hazard.

Titus said this is the case in the Cooper Spur Ski Area. The number and size of dead trees in the upper reaches of the ski area are too small to sell to timber companies. Yet, if they caught fire, the blaze could easily spread to the nearby Cloud Cap Inn, a historic log cabin at the timberline near the ski area.

If the ski area was developed, Titus sees some potential help because the owners would have to log many of those trees to put in new ski lifts. Because it is an existing resort, it is probably the last accessible place in or near Mt. Hood where a major resort could be built.

Opposition, however, is fueled by past environmental problems at Mt. Hood Meadows. In the past 20 years, it's owners have been found to have damaged areas around streams and let road gravel fill delicate high-mountain meadows.

Riley said those problems are either resolved or are being cleaned up. The company has learned its lessons, he said.

The fight over the resort will inevitably focus on the appropriate use of the land. Most of the private land around Cooper Spur is zoned for forest use. To change that zoning will require extensive county hearing, with the chance to appeal to the state Land Use Board of Appeals.'

Hood River County Commissioners are noncommittal on the development, saying they have to wait until a formal proposal is put before them. Although the county's economic development plan supports destination resorts, and the accompanying jobs and tax revenues, no one will commit either way on such a controversial issue.

"Frankly, I don't think it will end at the county level," said Meriwether. "It will be appealed."

The decision will challenge everyone involved to re-examine their ideas of what is the best use of Mt. Hood, a forest that in the 1920s was considered for national park status, said Moltzen, the former supervisor of the Mount Hood National Forest. She is now with the U.S. Bureau of Land Management in Montana.

"Whether it is snowmobiles in Yellowstone or ski areas on Mt. Hood, you have to ask what are the values for the county, state and the nation. " she said. "If you want a pristine area, then you sacrifice economic development and recreational opportunities."