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Measure Could Define Hood River County's Future

By Rob Manning

HOOD RIVER, OR 2003-11-03 (Oregon Considered) - Hood River County voters will weigh in tomorrow on a huge, contentious development proposal that could turn a large swath of wilderness into part of a ski resort. Opponents of the Cooper Spur expansion say it would take precious water away from farmers and drive real estate prices so high that farms won't be able to survive. Their ballot measure would require a vote any time a large development is considered on forest lands.

The winding roads leading from Highway 35 to the orchard farms north of Hood River are dusted with snow. Oregon's tallest peak, Mount Hood casts a long shadow over the valley. The snowfall also hints at the changing of the seasons; more people in the next few months will be coming up Highway 35 to go skiing than to buy fresh fruit from local growers.

But in recent years, the farms in this area have thrived, according to pear grower Mike McCarthy.

Mike McCarthy: "Farm profitability kind of goes up and down. Fortunately the last two years have been better than previous. Some growers have planted cherries and they're doing really well with cherries and so I think there's an element of optimism. A lot of farmers' kids have taken over the farms. So it creates a scenario where people want to stay on their land and keep it as farmland."

But McCarthy says he's not sure that's a realistic goal. Hood River County is looking seriously at allowing Mount Hood Meadows to expand its Cooper Spur ski area into a year-round destination resort.

Mount Hood Meadows conducted a land trade with the county two years ago in hopes of accumulating enough land to build the resort. If built, Meadows hopes the resort would lure out-of-state visitors to Mount Hood and nearby Hood River for extended getaways.

But state land use laws say the destination resort has to be at least 160 acres in size, and has to stay at least three miles away from productive farms. Under state law, that's defined as \$1,000 of income, per acre, per year.

Planning director Mike Benedict says the county is putting farms on maps and finding out what they grow - and how successful they are.

Mike Benedict: "And that was another issue - what crops in this county produce \$1,000 a year per acre. Do Christmas trees? There's a real paucity of data there, we're basically extrapolating one or two tree farms, unless we go with a statewide average which may or may not apply to our area."

Benedict acknowledges that the final data will come in part from outside experts rather than actual farmers. Benedict, and his supervisor, county administrator David Meriwether concede that county commissioners would like to see a destination resort. But Meriwether says they won't force it.

David Meriwether: "I think it's certainly an issue that needs to be examined and it's part of the county's goals to try to make that work. On the other side, I wouldn't say it's damn the torpedoes' we're going to get one of these in somewhere."

While local public planners insist they're not being pressured by either the county commission or Mount Hood Meadows to make the resort fit, opponents don't buy it. And that's largely where the idea for the ballot initiative came from.

The initiative would require a vote on any forest land development that would be greater than 25 units--whether homes or hotel rooms. On its face, the initiative wants to protect regional water supplies--a major concern to farmers all over the county.

Pear farmer Mike McCarthy says the initiative is necessary after the county and Meadows made the land trade in 2001, opening a spot for the resort.

Mike McCarthy: "That's why we need this initiative--that was a deal cut behind closed doors. By the time they had the public hearings, you could tell it was a done deal."

Looking out on a snow-flecked orchard, McCarthy says it ultimately comes down to a choice.

Mike McCarthy: "Is this going to be an agriculture community and is it going to continue to be? or is it going to be a trophy home community. It wouldn't take much to shift it from an ag community to a tourist community and the speculation on land values alone would kill us all."

Both McCarthy and county officials agree that agriculture and tourism can exist simultaneously. They disagree on whether a year-round resort is necessary to boost tourism, or whether it will condemn the farm economy.

The ballot initiative won't stop the resort. But if approved, it would create one more public vote before the resort could be built. Cooper Spur opponents hope that like driving on icy mountain roads, too much maneuvering could send the project into a snow bank.

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