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Houseal: Council's resort support is same as ever

By JESSICA COLLIER, Enterprise Staff Writer

TUPPER LAKE - Recent comments by the head of the Adirondack Council, stating that the environmental group will work to help the proposed Adirondack Club and Resort project get permitted, have met with excited responses from Tupper Lakers and supporters of the project.

"The board has indicated that we need to work to get a (state Adirondack Park Agency) permit with conditions that upholds the standards of the APA of no undue adverse environmental impact, and also a project that has economic benefit for Tupper Lake," said Adirondack Council Executive Director Brian Houseal.

The resort project would rebuild the Big Tupper Ski Area and develop the land around it with 651 luxury residential units and various amenities like a 60-room inn, a spa, a marina and an equestrian center

"I think that Brian's endorsement is a strong indication that this project is the right fit in the right time, in the right place," said Jim LaValley, head of Adirondack Residents Intent on Saving Their Economy, a group formed to support the project. "I'm very pleased that he's recognized it and made a public statement about it."

But Houseal told the Enterprise it's the same thing the Council has been saying all along.

"Our position has always been that there is an acceptable project within the proposed project put forth by (lead developer) Michael Foxman, and we have never sought to kill that project," Houseal said in a phone interview. "We've always thought that a project of that sort which would bring back the ski slope and have a base lodge and a broad array of resort opportunities was important for the future economic development of Tupper as well as the surrounding region."

There has been a lot of miscommunication and misinformation flying around about the project and where people stand on it, Houseal said. He said many people in Tupper Lake have emotional reactions when it comes to discussion on the project, and that may be where the confusion comes in.

"In some parts of Tupper Lake, when someone would recommend a modification or a change, it was seen as opposition rather than helpful," Houseal said. "So I don't know. I certainly wish the emotional rhetoric would be turned down in the final phases of this, but it may not happen."

He noted that the Adirondack Council paid a consultant fee for Melissa McManus to help Tupper Lake obtain a Smart Growth grant, and that the town and village have liked her so much they've continued to use her service.

"So that's just an indication that we really do care about economic development in Tupper Lake and elsewhere in the Adirondack Park," Houseal said.

Houseal also pointed to the fact that part of the Council's mission statement includes supporting vibrant communities in the Park, which means the municipalities need to be economically stable.

He said the emotions involved in conversations about development across the Adirondack Park have been getting in the way.

"I think the rhetoric right now in the Park - anti-APA, anti-Forest Preserve, anti-environmental organizations - is not productive at all, and we don't intend to respond in kind," he said. "We intend to get about the important work that's out there for us to do."

The important part

LaValley said he thinks the Council wanted to support the project from the beginning but pushed for changes to it during the mediation process, which took place after Foxman put an adjudicatory hearing on hold in 2007 to try to resolve some of the 10 issues the APA wanted to explore with the project outside of the structured hearing. The developers were willing to work with some of the modifications the Council sought at that point, LaValley said.

"There were some things identified by the Council that made good sense to the developer as well," he said.

But LaValley said he doesn't see that as the important part.

"If the Council believes that they've been supporting the project from the beginning, that's fine," LaValley said. "The most important thing right now is, at this critical point in time, that they've come out publicly and stated such."

Actions speak louder

Foxman told the Enterprise he believes Houseal's comments are inconsistent. The developer said that while he believes the Council's board did tell Houseal to support the project, he believes Houseal has opposed the project all along and may continue to do so "the same way preservationist groups always do: They stall, spread misinformation, and lobby to influence government.

"In fairness, since the statements are inconsistent, it depends upon what he actually does and what he actually meant," Foxman said. "I can't read his mind. I simply go by his actions, not his words."

He said he remains optimistic as the project moves from the confidential mediation phase back into the adjudicatory hearing. Pre-conferencing is expected to begin sometime in September.

"I don't think any of those groups are going to want to be seen as actively attempting to harm a project that the community so clearly wants and needs," Foxman said. "What they do now, they have to do in the light of day with people like you looking at them and assessing their actions. The twist and spin they put on things isn't important anymore. What matters now is what they do, and hopefully the press is going to look hard at what they do and why they do it."

Changes to the plan

Houseal said he is happy with some of the changes made during the mediation process, including the elimination of the Orvis shooting school, a canoe launch on Simon Pond and some high-elevation ridgeline housing, as well as the addition of a trail network and buffer zones in some areas. The parties involved in the project are at about an 85-percent solution now, he said.

"There have been all sorts of good and positive modifications made to the project already, but we believe that there are a few more," Houseal said.

One of the biggest changes the Council wants to see is the phasing of the project. Houseal said the Council wants to see work on the project starting from the center - at the Big Tupper Ski Area - and building out from there.

He and the Council board also wants to see some issues resolved with the wastewater treatment plan for the entire development.

Foxman wants to sell the great camp lots east of Lake Simond, and Houseal said the Council would like to see a conservation group buy it so it can be eventually incorporated into the Forest Preserve. If that doesn't happen, Houseal wants to see conservation easements or other restrictive covenants placed on those properties so they can be "managed appropriately for their wild country values."

He's hoping more progress can be made before the adjudicatory hearing begins, since he said the Council expects that will be a time-consuming, expensive undertaking.

"I don't think Tupper needs that, nor does the developer," Houseal said. "So I think in the coming weeks, we'll try to meet with some of the parties and see what can be resolved prior to adjudication."

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