

Hatcher Pass development plan open for public comments

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PALMER -- While Outside consultants analyze plans for a ski resort and residential development at Hatcher Pass, the Matanuska-Susitna Borough is seeking comments on rules guiding future development on borough-owned land there.

The borough is negotiating with Alaska developer JL Properties to develop part of roughly 3,000 acres the borough owns into a downhill ski resort, residential development and Nordic ski trail system. Stainback Public/Private Real Estate, a Houston, Texas, firm specializing in public/private partnerships, is currently reviewing the proposal.

JL Properties has said it plans to adhere to strict development rules, including restrictive building regulations to ensure a high-quality development. Critics of the company's proposal have demanded that the borough create special zoning rules for Hatcher Pass before the development plan of JL, or any company, is accepted.

For two years, community representatives have worked to make those rules. Called the Hatcher Pass Special Land Use District, the rules

are now out for public review. Even before they're adopted, the state Department of Natural Resources revised its Hatcher Pass Management Plan to use the rules as a basis for its land-use decisions in the area.

The rules cover everything from where a video arcade should go to how much natural vegetation must be kept in developed areas at Hatcher Pass. A related policies and standards manual goes into more detail about what development in the area should look like.

Joe Irvine, a member of the community advisory group that helped create the rules and standards, asked the two dozen people who attended a Monday public meeting to critique the plan and package of standards.

Kathy Wells, a longtime advocate of rules for development in the Hatcher Pass area and executive director of planning group Friends of Mat-Su, said she didn't get everything she wanted in the package of rules. But she said she likes the result.

After the meeting, Wells said the group was split on two main issues:

development setbacks from the Little Susitna River and the location of a secondary ski lift between the established ski resort base at the Government Peak ski area and the mountain's south side, near where residential development is planned.

The package of proposed rules doesn't say how close to the river development can occur. Instead, it includes a note saying that the community advisory group could not agree and that opinions ranged from 200 to 1,200 feet from the river.

People in the audience were equally focused on what happens in that corridor.

"A large part of that area we feel is not suitable for development with any kind of structure," said Steve Duncan of the federal Environmental Protection Agency aquatic resources unit.

Comments will be collected until July 28. Then they'll be crafted into amendments to the plan and sent back out for public review, Beck said. The second draft will go to the Mat-Su Planning Commission, where commissioners are expected to hold several meetings and at least one public hearing about the rules.