

New plan in works for Hatcher Pass development

\$50,000 CONTRACT: Developer expects details in February or early March.

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PALMER -- Heads up, ski fans. A new plan for nordic and alpine ski runs at Hatcher Pass should be unveiled in late February or early March.

The Matanuska-Susitna Borough Assembly on Tuesday approved a \$50,000 contract with Ron Swanson, former director of Mat-Su Community Development, to work on the plan. Swanson is working as the borough representative while contractor Dowl Engineers study soil data and other environmental information on land the borough owns and manages in the Hatcher Pass Public Use Area.

Swanson on Thursday said he's also drawing up a new plan for Hatcher Pass development, which he hopes to complete by early March.

"It's what I'm calling the new beginning," Swanson said.

For more than 20 years, a ski area at Hatcher Pass has been a dream in progress.

An early campaign by Tokyo mega-corporation Mitsui Ltd. to build a \$221 million, eight-lift ski resort to host an upcoming Winter Olympics failed feasibility studies. Other developers have tried over the years, most recently a \$42 million residential, nordic and alpine development plan by Anchorage developer JL Properties.

"We're trying to learn from the mistakes of the past, basically, and start over again. We tried a private developer and that didn't work. We tried public-private partnership, that didn't work," Swanson said.

The new plan is for a borough-built facility, privately operated, he said.

"We don't want to be operating this whole facility with borough staff," Swanson said.

Swanson retooled JL's plan, keeping the Olympic-quality nordic facility while downsizing other pieces, such as a day lodge at the alpine ski area. Swanson's plans include three ski lifts in the alpine area, but he said it's too early to say what types of lifts or how many groomed acres will be in his new plan.

Those details will depend on operational and capital costs, he said.

Most notably, however, his plan does not include residential development, a key feature of previous development proposals.

The idea of a subdivision is too controversial, Swanson said, and it's not clear what kinds of septic systems or other infrastructure soils in that area will support.

Borough Manager John Duffy on Tuesday told the Assembly he's looking for state funding sources, such as the Alaska Industrial Development and Export Authority.

A financing plan is not ready, he said.

Assemblywoman Michelle Church said she worried approving Swanson's contract amounted to paying for more study on an already over-studied project.

Assemblywoman Cindy Bettine said the plan to use Swanson's knowledge of the project seemed ideal.

Swanson said he was eager to work on the project because he wants to see lifts up and running.

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