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## Mat-Su Assembly puts off public vote on Hatcher Pass

**DATA LACKING:** Cost estimate won't be available until additional studies are complete.

By RINDI WHITE  
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Published: August 5th, 2008 11:05 PM  
Last Modified: August 5th, 2008 11:39 PM

WASILLA -- Now's not the time to ask voters whether the borough should build a modest ski chalet, lifts and a nordic skiing center at Hatcher Pass, Assembly members decided last week.

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Mary Kvalheim

Assemblywoman Mary Kvalheim sponsored a measure that would have asked voters whether the borough should develop an alpine and nordic ski area at Hatcher Pass.

Kvalheim said she wanted voters to weigh in before the borough spends more money there.

"What I hear is, they (voters) are tired of hearing us say we're going to do something and then not do it," Kvalheim said.

The measure failed before being scheduled for a public hearing, however. Kvalheim and Assembly members Pete Houston and Michelle Church voted in favor and Assembly members Lynne Woods, Tom Kluberton, Cindy Bettine and Rob Wells opposed it.

Woods said it's hard to say what voters would be casting ballots on. The Assembly has not yet adopted a development plan for the area. Engineering firm Dowl is currently conducting environmental testing there as part of a federal environmental impact statement. Results of the testing will guide how the area is developed.

The testing -- and a decision from the Federal Highway Administration about where to put a road accessing the south, or nordic, side of the would-be ski area -- is not expected for 18 months. Until that work is done, Woods said, the Assembly has no plan to present to voters.

"We're not ready yet," Woods said.

Kvalheim said she wanted a measure on the ballot that included general cost estimates for something modest. She wanted estimates for construction of a ski lift, a warming hut and two seasonal borough employees to keep things running. The estimates weren't included in the measure that appeared before the Assembly on June 29.

"If I saw it on the ballot without figures, I wouldn't vote for it," Kvalheim said. "I don't think the public is going to give us carte blanche."

Plans to put a ski area at Hatcher Pass have been in the works for more than two decades.

Past proposals involved wooing a private developer to build and manage the operation. But last year, after Anchorage developer JL Properties became the latest in a string of would-be partners to walk away from the project, the borough hired a former department head, Ron Swanson,

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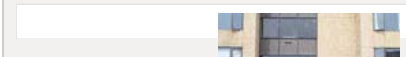
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to get it done.

Swanson's plan included one significant change: the borough would build the ski area. The borough has \$5.6 million in federal funds for roads and trails there and is seeking federal or state funding for other parts of the development.

The plan lists several options for how the ski area is operated. It could be run by a private company, a limited corporation attached to the borough or some other setup.

Under Swanson's plan, the scope of the alpine ski area was whittled to include just a day lodge and three lifts. The nordic plan includes an Olympic-quality trail system.

Swanson, reached by cell phone while in Hatcher Pass on Monday, said information such as cost estimates will be part of a retooled project proposal he plans to present to the Assembly this month.

But even those will be preliminary until the environmental review is complete.

He said crews on Monday were conducting stream and vegetation studies and mapping wetlands.

Geotechnical information will be gathered in winter.

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