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Road work, ski facility are laid out for borough

HATCHER PASS: Modest ski project is outlined.

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PALMER -- The Matanuska-Susitna Borough has finally received clearance to use \$6 million in earmarks it got from the federal government toward building roads in Hatcher Pass.



enlarge
MARC LESTER / Daily News archive 2007
With \$6 million in federal funds to build roads in Hatcher Pass, a ski resort may be closer to reality.

Also on Tuesday the Mat-Su Assembly heard from a consultant working on the project how it could use \$19 million more to build a modest nordic and alpine ski area that would require little in the way of operational subsidies.

Borough consultant and former borough department director Ron Swanson presented more information about his "New Beginning" plan for developing a long-discussed ski area at Hatcher Pass. Swanson worked on the Hatcher Pass project while a state employee and when he directed the Community Development and Land Management Department at the borough. He was hired last year to finally bring the project to fruition.

Swanson proposes that the borough build the ski area and run it like an enterprise or limited liability company. He likened the set-up to the state-owned Alaska Railroad Corporation or Alaska Housing Finance Corporation.

"Initial operations of the area would be overseen and operated by this independent association or commission whose board of directors would be appointed by the mayor, approved by the Assembly and who would

be responsible for all daily operations and recommendations for capital improvements," Swanson stated in the plan.

The Assembly will discuss the plan in more detail at a work session scheduled for 6 p.m. Sept. 18 in Assembly chambers.

The federal earmarks were accepted in 2005 as part of a federal highway spending plan. Initially included was \$1 million for Hatcher Pass roads, plus money to extend Seldon Road west near Wasilla and money to pave Point MacKenzie Road.

But the earmarks didn't contain enough money to finish either the Seldon Road or Point MacKenzie Road projects, borough manager John Duffy told the Assembly on Tuesday. Those road projects were paid for with state money instead.

The money will pay for an environmental analysis that

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is under way on the roughly 14,000 acres of borough-managed land at Hatcher Pass. That work is expected to be complete in fall 2009. Swanson estimated the total bill to complete the analysis would be \$2.8 million.

What's left over will pay for construction of roads, parking lots and trails that are part of the ski area project, Duffy said.

The results will dictate the scope of the ski area project, to some extent.

But Swanson on Tuesday delivered to the Assembly a phased-in plan that would include two lifts, a day lodge, snowmaking and night lighting in the first phase on the alpine side. Later phases would include another ski lift, a mid-mountain chalet and, finally, a high-speed detachable quad-seat lift.

On the nordic side, the project would open with 10 kilometers of family trails and 10 kilometers of competitive trails, then expand with five kilometers more of each type of trail. A day lodge, a sledding hill, night lighting, a biathlon range and even a conference center are part of future phases.

The proposed timeline would have lifts open and the nordic area operating by late 2012.

Swanson said he believes ticket sales should cover operational costs for the ski area by the second year of operation.

His estimates are based on a \$38 per day, \$33 per half-day price for adult downhill tickets and \$5 per day for use of the nordic facility.

Rentals, lessons, repairs and food and beverage services added to that total, although it will be up to the Assembly and the board appointed to oversee ski area operations to say how many of those things should be offered.

While those items would cover most of the operational cost, the Mat-Su Borough would likely pay the \$25 million development cost.

Swanson's report did not contain financing options. But he did suggest the borough finance initial construction, then seek to sell the ski area or "form a joint venture with private industry."



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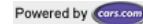
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• Read the plan, "A New Beginning-Hatcher Pass Ski Area," online at www.hatcherpass.com under "Documents and Reports."

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