

Lift ticket

*By John R. Moses
Frontiersman*

MAT-SU — Picture a day-use ski lodge with three lifts, runs for alpine skiers and trails for Olympic-class Nordic skiing on 11,000 acres of Mat-Su Borough-controlled land at Hatcher Pass.

The Borough is using the smaller-is-better approach to kick-start a new ski area at an already popular winter destination. Hearings could begin as soon as January on the potential environmental impacts of a ski area that neither housing nor conference centers as part of the economic mix.

A 12,000-square-foot day ski lodge with concession stands and a ski school replaces a similar and more ambitious plan floated recently by an Anchorage developer. This smaller lodge would include rental areas, lockers, and food and beverage service. It could also be used for visitor services and private community events during summer months.

“The project being envisioned today is much smaller than the project envisioned in previous years,” Borough project manager Ron Swanson said.

The former Borough administrator has worked on the Hatcher Pass project both in his days with the Community Development Department and in the 1980s with the state Department of Natural Resources.

Swanson said the Borough could begin planning how to finance the project as soon as it can determine an acceptable size for the resort area. He said some funding is available and past funds have been used to improve the resort area. Swanson said \$20 million is a good guess of the potential cost for what the Borough wants to build there.

Borough spokesperson Patty Sullivan said the new plan is more straightforward than those previous — a place to ski, perhaps a ski school and concessions.

“It’s a fabulous site for a ski center,” Sullivan said, noting that Hatcher Pass received snow before Anchorage and has kept it.

The slopes at Alyeska near Girdwood opened this weekend.

The proposed Hatcher Pass site is 55 miles from Anchorage. Cross country and alpine skiers may have something to look forward to should the project take off, as Nordic ski trails and Alpine runs are part of the plan. Proposals for the Borough to build a ski area at Hatcher Pass have been discussed for decades, and many have come and gone.

“I have titled this project, ‘Hatcher Pass — A New Beginning,’” Swanson said. “My goal is to capture the good ideas from past proposals, to eliminate the ideas that did not receive widespread community support, and to come up with a new or modified plan, which will garner support. The new plan must be financially feasible to build, generate enough revenue to support its operations and at the same time be affordable to local skiers and families.”

The Borough has aggressively pursued development at the site and put in some amenities meant to attract interest. The site already has underground electrical wires all the way to the ski area. Pre-

development tasks already completed include geotechnical studies, and drinking water and snowmaking water sources. The Borough has also improved the road to the proposed lodge site and created a parking area.

“In the winter, Hatcher Pass has been in use as a winter sports venue since the 1940s and sees use by cross-country and downhill skiers, snowboarders and snowmobile riders,” according to a Borough report on its proposal. “These activities are currently supported by small-scale businesses, which provide limited food and lodging, and some trail grooming services.”

A project team will work over the next few months to gather concerns the public and regulating agencies may have about the project and the amenities it would bring, like roads, parking areas and water and sewer systems. The process will be run by Anchorage-based contractor DOWL Engineers.

An environmental study and alternatives analysis could be completed by summer 2008. Development of the recreation area could begin following Borough adoption of the final recommendations. Once the size and scope of the project have been identified, various funding sources will be considered, Sullivan said.

Contact John R. Moses at john.moses@frontiersman.com or 352-2270.