

## Hatching a plan

### Another developer presents ideas for creating alpine, nordic ski area

By RINDI WHITE  
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PALMER -- Developers this week unveiled the latest plan to build a ski area in Hatcher Pass, a plan lauded by some but criticized by others as deficient in sewer service.

The plan, months in the making, was presented publicly at a Mat-Su Borough Assembly work session Thursday. It mixes old ideas with new and includes a downhill ski area, a day-use lodge, a residential area ringed by top-notch nordic ski trails and a riverside village complete with library, post office, convention center and fire hall.

The project was generally well received, but some assembly and audience members said the alpine area of Hatcher Pass may be too fragile to withstand the sewer and water demands the development would bring.

"We can't keep putting tons of housing in areas with individual well and septic," said Kathy Wells of the Hatcher Pass Special Land Use District citizens planning board. "It won't be sustainable."

The development group has considered central sewer and water but is focused on individual well and septic systems, said Leonard Hyde, president of JL Properties, the Anchorage development firm heading up a study of the proposed ski area.

"The primary reason we're looking to onsite sewer and water is one of cost. There are development challenges when you look at central sewer and water," Hyde said. "We've been assured ... that those soils are more than adequate to handle these systems."

Three previous developers have tried and failed to bring to fruition a plan to create a Hatcher Pass ski area. All three have apparently been stymied by high costs, environmental questions and uncertain demand.

Hyde, along with representatives of several firms also working on the ski-area project, unveiled concept drawings of the proposed recreation area north of Wasilla. After the presentation, the nearly 30 audience members flocked to a nearby conference room to examine the designs in more detail.

"The comments were universally supportive," said Hyde.

JL Properties has worked with other public entities on big-ticket projects. The firm is currently working with the Municipality of Anchorage on the proposed Anchorage Convention Center and has developed housing projects on Elmendorf Air Force Base recently.

In November 2003, JL Properties responded to a request for qualifications advertised by the borough in hopes of luring developers to bid on the Hatcher Pass project. A previous developer, Davis Constructors, had withdrawn from the project.

JL Properties reached an agreement with the Mat-Su Borough in May and began work on a \$100,000 concept design and feasibility study for the ski-area project. Hyde said the study should be complete by February.

"We will refine our design efforts over the next six weeks, and then we will continue discussions with the Mat-Su Borough," Hyde said.

The proposed residential area would be composed of high-density lots, lower-density 2-3 acre lots and 5-acre estate lots. The residential lots would be ringed by a nordic ski trail fit for hosting prep and professional competitive events. At the bottom of the hill would be a town square with a designated commercial center.

Hatcher Pass Special Land Use District would guide the development by adopting covenants, codes and restrictions, said Jim Sawhill of Lounsbury and Associates, an engineering firm associated with the project.

The riverside village design and aspects of the residential development are new. The proposed alpine ski area on Government Peak is little changed from a previous feasibility study by Economic Research Associates and Ecosign, both Outside firms, in 2002.

Tim Potter, director of planning with DOWL Engineers, also working on the proposal, said the development group is interested in offering a wide range of beginner to advanced-intermediate skiing options, with more midlevel runs than other Southcentral Alaska ski areas.

Potter said several styles of lifts are proposed, including a platter or poma lift, a "magic carpet" conveyor belt system and a high-speed quad-style lift that would carry skiers to the top of the mountain in six minutes.

"It's a much sexier lift," Potter said, "and instead of starting off with something that looks like any Podunk ski area, we'd go directly to this more advanced lift."

Duffy said the development plan, once finalized in February, goes back to the Borough Assembly for a public hearing.

Duffy was reluctant to speculate about how long it may take before ground is broken on the project.

He said if the process were put on a fast track, JL Properties could be at work this summer. But that's not likely, he said. JL Properties and the Borough Assembly must negotiate a joint-venture agreement in order to move forward. When the borough entered into joint-venture negotiations with Port MacKenzie wood chip company NPI, LLC, those negotiations took nearly a year.

"Hopefully, this won't take that long, but it could," Duffy said.

Daily News reporter Rindi White can be reached at [rwhite@adn.com](mailto:rwhite@adn.com) or at 352-6709.

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