

Decision delayed on hot springs resort as AG asks for more fire protection

By CHRIS COUNTS

IS A plan to build a 103-room hotel and 77 condominiums at Paraiso Hot Springs the magic formula that will bring much needed economic opportunity to South Monterey County? Or is it a foolhardy plan on a fire-prone site that could put the lives of guests and workers at risk? Comments made at a Monterey County Planning Commission hearing March 27 in Salinas included predictions of both scenarios.

The hearing comes just one week after county officials unexpectedly received a letter from California Attorney General Xavier Becerra identifying shortcomings in the resort's environmental impact report relating to fire risk — and suggesting the resort should be required to build its own fire station.

After listening to lengthy testimony from supporters and opponents, the supervisors voted unanimously to hold off on approving the resort's EIR, and they continued the hearing to a later date.

Located seven miles west of Greenfield in the foothills of the Santa Lucia mountains on a 235-acre property, the hot springs resort has operated since the late 19th century, but has been closed since 2003.

Six years after buying the resort, owner and developer John Thompson unveiled a plan for an ambitious makeover in 2005. Besides demolishing existing buildings and constructing a hotel and condominiums, he proposes to create a spa, expand an existing water system, install a wastewater treatment system and cut down 185 oak trees. The builder is also asking for after-the-fact approval for illegally tearing down 18 structures, including nine historic cottages, in 2003.

Mayor cites jobs

Proponents say the resort's makeover will pay big economic dividends in a part of the county that doesn't reap many benefits from the millions of tourists who visit the Monterey Peninsula.

The mayor of Soledad, Fred Ledesma told the planning commission that he and his colleagues — the mayors of King City, Gonzalez and Greenfield — all back the development.

Almost \$300 billion was spent in the county last year on tourism, Ledesma said, but "99 percent of that was on the Monterey Peninsula."

The mayor also said what the developer is proposing is reasonable.

"They're not trying to turn a cannery into a

hotel," he suggested. "They're taking a resort that's been there for 100 years, and they're basically restoring it."

While Ledesma said he welcomed comments from Cal Fire about the fire risk — and farmers about traffic — he was critical of those who don't live near the development but are speaking out against it. "I don't really appreciate the comments from people who come from other parts of the county telling us what's good for our region because the cities feel this is a great economic boom for our communities," he added.

The owner of the resort, John Thompson, told planning commissioners the resort will create 300 jobs, and raise \$2 million in transit occupancy tax and \$1 million in property tax each year, and generate \$8 million in tourist dollars per year.

'Smaller is safer'

Opponents who spoke out against the plan included three representatives from Land Watch Monterey County.

"Why would you approve an exclusive mega resort in a high fire hazard area on a rural property with inadequate roads and water?" Land Watch executive director Mike Delapa asked planning commissioners. "What message does it send to developers that they can come into Monterey County, hire a smart and always self-deprecating attorney, make some strategic friends in high places, and be rewarded with a project that should never be built? Please reject the after-the-fact permit and downsize the project so that it's no larger than its historical use — a smaller project is safer project."

Two members of the Alliance of Monterey Area Preservationists spoke, including board member Jeff Becom, who argued that the developer needs to pay a high price for demolishing the historical cabins 16 years ago. Becom said it would cost at least \$1.7 million to rebuild them — and he suggested that number as a mitigation fee. "This is the kind of money that needs to go to historical

preservation in this region," he said.

Attorney general chimes in

While most of those commenting on the plan for the resort were from Monterey County, Becerra's comments raised a few eyebrows.

In a letter submitted March 20, the attorney general identified problems with the plan and its EIR. The letter specifically took aim at fire protection, echoing concerns previously expressed by Cal Fire.

According to the letter, the EIR must analyze "the increased risk of wildfire that will result" from the development and "should address evacuations" in the event of a fire. It also contends the entirety of Paraiso Springs Road "should be widened."

The project's environmental report indicates the resort is 15 minutes away from a fire station — the maximum time recommended by the Monterey County General Plan — but the attorney general's letter notes that Google Maps shows it 18 miles away. As a result, the environmental study "should be revised to accurately reflect the distance of the nearest fire station to the project site."

The letter goes on to say that this should be remedied, "preferably with the construction of a fire station onsite as requested by the local fire district."

Planning commissioner Martha Diehl called the submission of the letter "extraordinary."

"I've been on this commission since 2001, and this is the first time I recall receiving anything from the attorney general's office at all directly," Diehl said. "It really caught my attention — that is not business as usual."

Attorney Tony Lombardo, who is representing the developer, agreed the letter is "extraordinary."

"I'm trying to determine what it was that motivated the attorney general," Lombardo added. "I've done a lot of really large projects around the state and never had a letter like that."

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