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Resort Refusal a Win for Bighorn Wildland

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The Municipal Planning Commission (MPC) of Clearwater County refused the development permit application for the development of the Abraham Glacier Spa and Resort near the Bighorn Wildland. The March 24 decision supports maintaining the wilderness character of the Bighorn Wildland, an area for which AWA is seeking legislated protection. Development of the resort would have placed unacceptable pressure on the Wildland through increased access and inappropriate use.

Among the reasons for refusing the application were the unsuitability of the site chosen for the resort and the fact that the applicant had not undertaken the necessary studies on the proposed sites.

“The County made the right decision because it did not allow a development to go ahead that has great potential to damage the area. We support their decision,” says Alan Ernst, owner of Aurum Lodge.

Norman McCallum, band administrator of the Big Horn Reserve, was pleased with the County’s decision to refuse the development permit: “Wisdom prevailed on behalf of Clearwater County and others in attendance. The First Nations people were not consulted on the project and there are many outstanding issues to be resolved for the First Nations people. ... There are many outstanding issues for the people of Alberta and Canada that were not addressed.”

In 2002 proponent 1006335 Alberta Inc. (Alberta Inc) proposed to construct the Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort, a full-service, self-contained health spa and resort. The resort was proposed for the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node located along the David Thompson highway (Hwy 11) west of Nordegg and near the Bighorn Wildland. The 260-acre development would have included a main lodge and more than 100 self-contained cabins. Other amenities such as restaurants, conference and banquet facilities, a cosmetic surgery clinic, pharmacy, and health spas would have been on-site. The resort would have included 200 staff, accommodated approximately 800 people, and attracted more than 200,000 visitors per year.

Although this sounds like a good opportunity for economic development in the area, think again. In no way did this development complement the wilderness characteristics of the Abraham Lakes area. The scale of the project was too large, the potential cumulative impacts from the resort were not appropriate for this area, and the development did not adequately comply with the requirements outlined for the Whitegoat Development Node planning documentation. A facility such as this would be more appropriate if constructed in one of the surrounding gateway communities such as Nordegg, Caroline or Rocky Mountain House.

The area proposed for the resort development lies on the bank of Abraham Lake and adjacent to the Cline River. This area is considered ecologically significant as it contains zones of prime protection and critical wildlife habitat (major wildlife movement corridor), and supports provincially identified Environmentally Significant Areas. The Node area is located near the Siffleur and White Goat Wilderness areas, the Kootenay Plains Ecological Reserve and the Bighorn Wildland.

The resort has been the source of much controversy, particularly over the issue of environmental protection and suitability. In June 2003 the Environmental Manager determined that Alberta Inc’s proposed resort did not require an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Lorne Taylor, Minister of Alberta Environment, agreed. Following this decision, groups such as AWA and Alberta League for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (ALERT) continued to push the government to perform an EIA.





Given the ecological significance and relatively pristine nature of the proposed resort site, an EIA report would have provided the vital environmental information required to assess and evaluate the potential environmental impacts of the development on the area before the resort proceeded. Unfortunately, no EIA was deemed necessary.

Other stakeholders, including the Stoney Nation, sent letters of concerns regarding the resort to the Premier, the Ministers of the Environment and Sustainable Development, and the MLA for the area. The Stoney Tribal Council strongly opposed the resort development. Some of the reasons behind their objection included the lack of meaningful consultation provided to the Stoney Nation; the disturbance of the Stoney Nation's culture and areas of historic significance; outstanding Bighorn-Stoney land claims; the large size of the resort and its negative impact on the traditional lands, water systems (sewage/disposal) and environment; and the lack of respect and consultation for the Stoney Nation's concerns for an EIA report.

AWA supports low-impact tourism development that does not compromise the ecological integrity of wilderness. Large-scale tourism developments are not compatible with wilderness values and experience. These developments only serve to impede the wilderness character that people come to see and experience. We are now waiting to see if the proponent will appeal the County's decision.

Note: On April 7, the proponent appealed the MPC decision.

