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## Abraham Glacier Wellness Resort is Dead, County Land Plan Reviewed

By Lara Smandych

Three years after its conception, a proposal to place a resort on the ridge above Abraham Lake adjacent to Bighorn Wildland is dead, says Clearwater County. The final blow came in March 2005 when the government cancelled the reservation on the land where the developer, Don McCarger, was to build the resort.

"Based on the deficient proposal we saw, the county did right in declining the application," says Alan Ernst, owner of Aurum Lodge. "We must ensure that high standards are also applied when reviewing new applications. This area is too sensitive and too valuable to be ruined by speculative developments and unsuitable projects."

The proposed resort was to be a 520 acre, full-service, self-contained health spa and resort on the ridge above Abraham Lake adjacent to Bighorn Wildland in the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node.

McCarger is apparently threatening to sue the province for \$120 million for ruining his opportunity to lease crown land. After being refused a development permit by Clearwater County in 2004, McCarger exhausted all options to gain approval for his resort including appealing to the County and taking his fight all the way to the Court of Appeal in Edmonton.

Even though the resort is off the radar screen, concern over future development in the area remains. Even if McCarger wants to reapply for a development permit, there may be many applications in line ahead of him. Before any new applications will be accepted for the area, the county will review the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node Concept Plan.

The Plan provides direction for land uses and design guidelines for new development in the Node. The review process has already been initiated and Clearwater County is seeking written stakeholder input and holding public meetings.

"Adoption of the Concept Plan will mean clearer rules for any future developers who are interested in the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node," says Martha Kostuch, president of the Alberta League for Environmentally Responsible Tourism (ALERT). "The Concept Plan recognizes that the value of the Node is its wilderness appeal."

AWA and ALERT believe the Concept Plan should be adopted for the area with modifications, including the establishment of a wildlife corridor free from development, a limit placed on development size from small to medium sized accommodation, and the elimination of some discretionary uses, including the establishment of a heliport.

"The tourism emphasis for such a sensitive and extraordinarily pristine and beautiful site should be nature-based," says Vivian Pharis, AWA Director, who believes the current plan is a huge improvement over earlier plans. "What should not be invited into the area is inappropriate Banff townscape-style entertainment development."

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.





“My primary concern with development at Whitegoat Lakes is that it will again chip away at one of our few remaining intact wild lands, by inviting large numbers of people onto its brink,” says Pharis. “In this age of mobility, I see no reason why such tourism developments should not be restricted to existing communities that can act as the ‘gateways’ to wild places.” She believes Nordegg, Sundre, and Rocky Mountain House are all more appropriate sites for resort development.

The County seems committed to the vision and intent of the Concept Plan. Hopefully, the Plan will include some very stringent development limitations and requirements for the Node. However, the Plan deals only with activity within the Node itself, leaving activities and developments in the surrounding region uncontrolled and unaddressed.

For more information on the Whitegoat Lakes Development Node Concept Plan review, contact Joe Baker, Clearwater County at 403.845.4444.

