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Frontiersman - Spectrum

It's been about a year since I last wrote about the \$15 million Jack Nicklaus Golf Course supposedly being planned for the Butte. Back then, I chronicled the incremental approach the Borough had been using to take a 320-acre public parcel with a popular trail system and salmon-spawning stream, and turn it over to Victor Trygstad and his secret investors. What was first sold as a "World Class Destination Resort" deserving a "highest and best use" designation for our public land, has turned out to be, as predicted, just a subdivision.

Valley resident Bill Collins had already applied to purchase a small portion of the parcel, but was turned down because of "bad timing". Trygstad already had control of 500 privately owned acres, but he said Jack Nicklaus told him he had to have the extra 320 acres or he could not build a golf course. Trygstad played golf videos at more than one Borough meeting, and conjured images of wealthy Japanese tourists coming through Palmer in glass-domed railroad cars, on their way to the Homestead Resort where they would "gather joyfully around the hearth" in between golfing, horseback riding, sleigh rides, or hay rides.

Trygstad never produced, as requested several times, a resume or any financial data showing he could even begin to finance this project, or that the project was at all feasible, despite repeated requests from the Borough.

In the face of overwhelming public opposition, the Planning Commission said that the Resort was the "highest and best use" for the land, and reclassified the parcel so it could be sold. Just before the Assembly vote, Trygstad appeared on Channel 2 News, explaining the project would no longer be a public resort, but a private "members-owned" facility. He went on to state that he would build the Nicklaus course on the private land even if he failed to procure the 320 acres of borough land.

Despite the complete reversals, the Assembly voted to lease Trygstad the parcel. After the mayoral election, the 55-page lease guaranteeing that the promised Jack Nicklaus golf course would be built, was gutted and replaced by a watered-down 11-page lease specifying a "golf course designed by a notable designer". The only reason given for this incremental downgrade was to guarantee completion of the project in the event of Jack's death, since he apparently was going to be personally designing the course. Another clause was added to the lease, allowing Trygstad to transfer it to another company with the same stated purpose. More than one person testified before the assembly that this "highest and best use" project could now end up as a trailer park and a putt-putt course.

After another year of observing the familiar pattern of deadlines missed by Trygstad and extended again and again by the Borough, we have arrived at the next logical incremental downgrade. Trygstad has joined with Judd Walker of Waldec Inc., to form Pioneer Mountain Properties, LLC. Walker is a real developer who has completed actual projects. He spoke at the last Butte Community Council meeting, and appears to be straightforward and practical. Walker said he was unaware of the controversy surrounding the parcel. He insisted that he was in control, not Trygstad, and that he wants to work with the community. He then stated that a golf course was probably not feasible, and he may want to bring the matter before the Assembly again. Jill Parson, Borough Land Management Director, pointed out that the latest version of the lease does not even require an actual golf course before the option to purchase can be exercised. Walker said that he wants to develop part of the 500 acres of private land, reserving the area around Burkholder Lake for a possible future resort. (This is where the golf "clubhouse" was to be located.) I'll give Mr. Walker the benefit of the doubt. However, he did assume the terms of the lease, such as it is, when he went into business with Trygstad. Now we get to the part where someone in the Borough says, "It depends on what the meaning of 'Jack Nicklaus Golf Course' is".

When this is all over, the Borough will have totally subverted the public process. Public hearings and expert testimony mean nothing. The concerns of the community and of individuals were outweighed by what was termed the "the good of the Borough", and "highest and best use", based on the "Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course" and "World Class Destination Resort". First, Bill Collins' application to purchase a

small portion of the parcel was rejected because of “bad timing”. Since then, we’ve had to endure years of manipulation, word-games, and stonewalling as the whole 320 acres is steered to some unknown group of individuals for some unknown purpose. What started out as concern about our community, our trails, and our salmon and game habitat, has evolved into concern with the way the Borough plays with public assets. Would any of the Assembly members have invested their own money in the project, as it was put forward? Wouldn’t they have demanded proof of financial ability, or at least a resume, before forking over their own money? This episode raises serious questions about the wisdom of other high-priority Borough projects.

I’ve written about this matter several times. Not once has anybody supporting the other side of this issue written to defend it, with the possible exception of Assemblyman DeVilbiss. How about the people from The Palmer Economic Development Authority, RC&D, the various Chambers of Commerce, the CPA’s, and the real estate salesmen who testified in support of the “World Class Destination Resort” so Trygstad could have exclusive non-competitive access to this public parcel? Surely you would like to weigh in on this issue as it comes to its foregone conclusion, which surprisingly, has absolutely nothing to do with Jack Nicklaus.

This sort of thing doesn’t happen by accident, and it’s been obvious from the beginning that pressure has been brought to bear, from inside or outside the Borough, to short-circuit the public process and steer this parcel to one place. I’ve begun posting some interesting public documents at <http://www.alaska.net/~jim/golf>. If you have any information about this issue, please e-mail jim@alaska.net. Somebody out there knows the real story.

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Butte