

Butte resort: a study in incrementalism

The Homestead Resort controversy has been an interesting study in the process of incrementalism. Some on the assembly may be familiar with this process as it relates to liberal politics, in which an agenda is implemented in small steps during a long period of time, so the citizens become accustomed to a reduced level of freedom before proceeding to the next step.

The borough's actions regarding Homestead Resort have proceeded similarly, except over a compressed time scale spanning about 18 months.

Following is a summary showing the progression of the issue:

1. The planning commission reclassified a popular 320-acre parcel so it could be transferred to Victor Trygstad, non-competitively, based on a number of presentations. These included Jack Nicklaus videos, and visions of a \$15 million "World-Class Destination Resort" featuring a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course, bringing wealthy Japanese tourists through Palmer in glass-domed railroad cars. Despite repeated requests, Trygstad failed to produce a resumé, or anything in writing about his project, except a one-page artist's sketch of a golf course. Trygstad claimed to have several investors, all of whom wanted to remain anonymous.

2. After reclassification, Trygstad appeared on Channel 2 News, explaining his vision of the "Homestead National Golf and Country Club" — a private members-only residential community featuring a Jack Nicklaus Signature Golf Course. Trygstad claimed to have a contract with the Nicklaus Design company. Despite the reversal in the character of the project, the assembly voted to lease Trygstad the parcel.

SPECTRUM

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3. The borough Planning Department prepared a lease with option to purchase, setting forth conditions requiring Trygstad to build the promised 18-hole Jack Nicklaus Golf Course. Trygstad did not respond to several requests to discuss or negotiate the lease.

4. After the election, this 55-page lease has been all but discarded. The latest public version Trygstad wants is 11 pages long, and allows Trygstad to exercise the purchase option after submitting a letter from any "notable golf course designer" stating that he has a contract to design a "golf course".

The borough has no say regarding who is "notable," or what constitutes a "golf course." The lease payments are \$500, or, perhaps, as much as 6 percent a month per month, for the first six months, and are based upon 6 percent of the land value afterwards. All lease payments apply toward the purchase price.

Trygstad would never have received such a sweetheart non-competitive deal from the borough, in the face of massive public opposition, if he had submitted a proposal such as this from the start.

His incremental bait-and-switch tactics and frequent schmoozing of assembly members has paid off.

The only constant throughout this process has been Trygstad's desire to remove the popular trail system from the parcel and secure title with no risk, no conditions, and no competitive bidding.

There is no evidence of plans or financial ability for a Jack Nicklaus Golf Course. Why should someone get non-competitive access to land if they just plan to subdivide it, or hold it for speculation?

At a recent Butte Community Council meeting, my own assemblyman (Larry DeVilbiss) stated he would amend the ordinance to require a golf course.

When asked if it would be a Jack Nicklaus golf course, he replied "Yes." (It's on the tape, Larry.) At the assembly meeting, he did in fact introduce the amendment to require a golf course.

When Jay Nolfi suggested the amendment specify a Jack Nicklaus golf course, Larry DeVilbiss replied: "What if Jack Nicklaus dies?"

Col. Sanders died years ago, Larry, but the chicken still tastes the same.

Playing dumb to constituents and engaging in word games to avoid the real issues dovetails with the liberal incrementalism and doublespeak currently evident in the federal government.

Thwarting the self-determination of communities is not conservatism, and working special, non-competitive deals for friends is not free enterprise.

The only other people to benefit from non-competitive dumping of borough land will be the real-estate salesmen who receive commissions from the sales, regardless of the sales price.

Now, a Wisconsin group wants 120 acres of Parks Highway frontage property for \$20,000 or \$166 per acre.

The message has been received loud and clear: come to Mat-Su and suck up for sweet deals on public land.

Jim Courtney is an active member of the Butte Community Council.