

Another Day, Another Delay

No folks. No need to get worried. Tom DeLay doesn't have a family member going into politics.

Rather, I am referring to the Town's never-say-live General Plan Update.

The Town Council hearings scheduled for the 11th, 12th and 18th on certification of the Plan's Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and adoption of the plan itself have been postponed indefinitely.

Community Development Director Mark Wardlaw said Wednesday that the Town had received 56 letters and a total of 900 comments on the Draft EIR. The Town's responses to these comments have to be published and reviewed before any further steps can be taken.

The new USFS permit with Mammoth Mountain, issued Dec. 15th, does include the ski-back trail property according to Alex Fabbro, MMSA's Government Relations Manager.

The property, which extends from the maintenance garage down to the North Village, was not originally included in the previous permit, although it was eventually added as an amendment. This makes that amendment a bit more permanent.

Just because the property is included in the lease, however, doesn't mean the ski-back trail is a done deal. The USFS has yet to complete its Environmental Assessment (EA) of MMSA's current proposal.

"Historically, the ski-back trail was discussed along with a lot of other projects, lifts and permits as part of the 1981 Master Development Plan," said Fabbro. This plan was updated in 1984 but has not been updated since. As a condition of the new permit, MMSA has until Dec. 15, 2007 to update the Master Plan.

The Town appears to be making some progress in the area of Transient Occupancy Tax collection. Following an investigation by The Sheet last February into the illegal rental of single-family residences, Town Council directed Staff to initiate an educational program to inform people this practice was indeed illegal. Council also hoped to increase taxpaying compliance among condominium owners.

According to a report by Finance Director Brad Koehn, the Town has received and processed 49 business tax applications since September from individual condo owners who are new Transient Occupancy Tax (T.O.T.) payers. 103 applications were also received from those who rent their property on a long-term (more than thirty days) basis.

A cursory check online, however, shows that there are still a significant number of property owners advertising short-term rental of their single-family residences. In fact, I would say there are more listings this year than last.

Mayor Wood has advocated taking the Peter Tosh approach to the home-rental situation. "Legalize It. Don't Criticize It." And tax tax tax it. One local realtor acknowledged this week that there are a number of prospective buyers who would pull the trigger and purchase in Mammoth if they could rent their homes out over the holidays to cover the taxes.

Other Council members are a bit gun-shy. Councilman Kirk Stapp opposes legalizing single-family home rentals. "It seems to fly in the face of community," he said. "Our vision statement specifically talks about protecting neighborhoods."

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Our vision statement also apparently talks about protecting citizens from fire hazards on New Year's Eve. Perhaps that's why Police and Fire officials decided this was the perfect night to harass Whiskey Creek and stand on the staircase in their uniforms.

And wait, was that Rick Phelps on the staircase too twiddling his thumbs? Appears that the buzz in town is that it's time for Phelps to deliver. As Councilman Kirk Stapp said, "If we provide the seed money, he's got to do something. Not a study. Not flyers in condos exhorting people to turn off the lights when the room is not in use, but a product. The Library. The Police Facility." Stapp advocates leveraging the seed money via the Mammoth Lakes Housing model (grants) and get something built.

No product. No money.

The seed money, Stapp hopes, will come from the revamped community services initiative which calls for a 0.5% sales tax increase and a 1% increase in Transient Occupancy Tax.

One of those community services which Stapp hopes to fund is 911 Dispatch Service. Which makes sense, especially when you've got the County holding you hostage. The Sheriff's Dept. has informed the Mammoth Lakes Police Dept. that it will charge the Town \$307,000 in dispatch costs for '05-'06. This represents a 16.8% increase over the \$263,000 for '04-'05. The County cites a large increase in "employee benefit" costs as a reason for the hike. A member of the MLPD replies, "It doesn't cost the Sheriff's Dept. any more for those dispatchers to be there. They have to be there anyway. This is a funding mechanism for the Sheriff's Dept. So we [Mammoth] end up paying for their new Expeditions every year."

Finally, in regards to the Ranch Road dispute, Mayor Pro-Tem Tony Barrett arranged a meeting Thursday between John Wentworth and Chuck Lande of the Chadmar Group. Chadmar, which bought out most of Linda Dempsey's property interests last year, is considering allowing a public easement through its property and is also considering building a small parking lot on its property at Snowcreek VI for backcountry enthusiasts interested in accessing the Sherwins. Talk is in the early stages. Stay tuned.

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- Jack Lunch

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