

Belleayre Resort backers outnumber opponents at public hearing

Published: Thursday, May 30, 2013

By JAY BRAMAN Jr.
Correspondent



HIGHMOUNT, N.Y. — Supporters of the proposed Belleayre Resort at Catskill Park were in the majority at a public hearing about the plan that attracted some 300 people.

The state Department of Environmental Conservation hearing, held Wednesday in the Discovery Lodge at the Belleayre Mountain Ski Center, focused on both the proposed private-sector resort and the state's \$74 million plan to expand the ski facility.

The hearing was the first in more than five years on Crossroad Ventures' resort plan, a \$400 million proposal now 14 years in the making. And unlike last time, people who favor the resort outnumbered opponents.

Along the road leading to Belleayre before the hearing were signs with such statements as "Eliminate welfare," "Opportunity knocks once" and "I want a job."

At the doorway to the lodge, a vendor handed out free T-shirts and buttons that proclaimed support for the resort. The vendor estimated about 75 percent of attendees said they backed the plan.

Applause for speakers who favored the project suggested a similar pro-resort majority.

Many of the comments at the hearing came from residents and officials of Delaware County, where a portion of the resort would be located. The rest would be in the Highmount section of the Ulster County town of Shandaken.

Speakers from such places as Fleischmanns, Margaretville, Andes and Roxbury spoke in favor of both the resort and the ski center expansion, citing a dismal local economy and the need for the jobs and opportunities that they believe both projects would create.

Public officials were invited to speak first, and U.S. Rep. Chris Gibson, R-Kinderhook, and state Assemblyman Cliff Crouch, R-Guilford, joined Delaware County officials in support of both the resort and what is called the "full build-out" of the state-owned ski center.

All speakers were subject to three-minute time limits, illustrated by a virtual hourglass projected on a screen.

Some people who spoke against the resort project, including former town of Shandaken Supervisor Peter DiModica, were booed for warning the project would not bring promised benefits.

Matt Frisch, a part-time area resident, urged the state Department of Environmental Conservation — which must decide how large the ski center will become and whether the resort project can proceed — to carefully review projections regarding the ski center build-out.

“Short of giving away tickets for nothing, it’s hard to imagine how Belleayre would double its number of visitors,” he said.

Under the expansion plan, the ski center — which is operated for the state by the Olympic Regional Development Authority — is to get another 5.3 miles of ski trails on the site’s west side and enough extra chair lifts, lodge space and parking facilities to handle 9,000 skiers per day, roughly twice what Belleayre can handle now.

Some speakers said they were worried the resort might someday become a casino. Developers, though, said restrictions would be placed in the land deed to prevent that from happening.

Other speakers said the current version of the resort proposal, dramatically smaller than what first was proposed in 1999, is “immeasurably better” than the original and should be approved.

At the beginning of the hearing, Dan Ruzow, an attorney representing Crossroads Ventures, gave a lengthy description of the plan’s downsizing over time.

The resort is to comprise two portions. One would be family-oriented facility with a golf course; the other would be a spa-hotel. The project also is to include vacation residential units.

Ruzow said the resort would generate 541 full-time jobs and 230 part-time jobs. Average wages, he said, would be \$14 to \$15 an hour.

He also said the resort would pay about \$3.7 million in property taxes to the counties, towns and school districts in which it is to sit.

Comments on the latest environmental impact statements for the ski center and resort plans are being accepted through July 24. Comments can be emailed to belleayre@gw.dec.state.ny.us or sent by regular mail to Daniel Whitehead, Region 3 Environmental Permit Administrator, NYSDEC, 21 S. Putt Corners Road, New Paltz, N.Y. 12561.