

Balsams Files For Site Plan Review

NH BFA Looking Into How Much State Taxpayers Could Be On Hook For If Project Goes Belly Up

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The Balsams redevelopment team took a step forward this month when they filed a site plan review application with the Coos County Planning Board for the planned expansion of the Wilderness Ski Area.

That application will be reviewed at a meeting of the county planning board at 6 p.m. Tuesday at the North Country Resource Center at 629 Main St., Lancaster, to determine if it is complete.

If deemed complete, county planners will schedule a public hearing at a later date.

On Tuesday, project spokesman Scott Tranchemontagne said the plan is to submit two site plan approvals for the estimated \$143 million Phase 1 of the project – one application for the ski area expansion and another for the village expansion, with the latter to include renovation of the Dix and Hampshire houses and construction of new buildings.

“Our hope remains to have all permits and financing in place to break ground this summer,” said Tranchemontagne.

In their 58-page site plan review application, developers said, “Construction of the ski area will take place over a multi-year period depending on market conditions.”

The opening phase is expected to be six ski lifts and 250 acres of new trails. In the plan are ski trail lights and a ski-back bridge.

“Construction of opening phase snow-making water delivery systems, utilities, lifts and trails and related infrastructure will take place in 2016 and 2017,” they said. “The timing and scope of subsequent phasing will depend on market demand.”

Beyond the expanded ski area, redevelopment plans include a new hotel, conference center, lake village, marketplace, and condominiums.

The Balsams has been closed since September 2011. Developers said a resurrected resort could eventually employ more than 1,000 people and be the economic driver of the region.

Meanwhile, as the project looks to file an application for \$28 million in bonds from the N.H. Business Finance Authority (BFA), the state is looking into how much of the BFA funding New Hampshire taxpayers would be on the hook for if the project goes bust.

As of Tuesday, the BFA did not have an application from the Balsams developers.

Presently, the bank, Northern Bank and Trust Co., of Massachusetts, is awaiting the appraisal that is a condition in any BFA approval, BFA Executive Director Jack Donovan said Tuesday.

The appraisal is expected to be submitted by the end of the month.

“That will be key decision point,” said Donovan.

The BFA procedure is a two-step process and will also include a feasibility study with economic projections.

The Balsams is in the unincorporated place of Dixville and legislation passed last year allows unincorporated places without taxing authority the opportunity to apply for BFA bond funding by establishing their own tax increment financing districts, like incorporated municipalities.

In Dixville, the Coos County Delegation would need to first approve such a district.

While the county would approve it, however, Donovan said county taxpayers will not be on the hook if the Balsams redevelopment for some reason goes belly up.

"The county itself, the way it is set up, is not responsible," he said.

State taxpayers, however, are among those who would be on the hook, he said.

"The question is how big that would be, how it would be managed and who would pay for it," said Donovan.

The appraisal will determine the fair market value of the property and the forced liquidation value if something pushes the Balsams and its assets into a sale auction, he said.

"Those will be interesting numbers," said Donovan.

If a foreclosure were to happen, timeshare unit purchasers and the bank could be on the hook for some of it and the state for the remainder, he said.

The state will determine more specific numbers, he said.