

Jumbo decision to stay at home

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Directors of the Regional District of East Kootenay have voted to keep the Jumbo decision at home.

A motion to return to the decision to the provincial government was defeated 141 last week, after a lengthy meeting at which 18 speakers took the floor and passionately spoke about the resort proposal.

Nine speakers were in favour of the motion; nine were opposed.

David Wilks of Sparwood originally moved to refer the decision back to the provincial government with the suggestion that the Jumbo valley be made into a "resort municipality."

Most of the debate took place not around the Jumbo resort, but the principle of local government.

MLA Norm Macdonald spoke about the importance of keeping local decisions at the local level. "No matter what your opinion, it is clear that people want to express it and be heard," he said.

Area F director Martin Cullen of Canal Flats voted against the motion. The province would fast-track this without discussion by the residents. We need to deal with this here, he said.

Invermere mayor Mark Shmigelsky agreed that the board must retain the right to conduct the public process. That's our job," he said. "If we don't let people have their say, we are heading down the slippery slope of deciding what to give away to the province and what to keep."

Canal Flats councillor and regional district board member Ute Turas also voted against the motion. "I'm an almost new councillor in an almost new municipality. One of the reasons we wanted a local government is because we wanted a voice. Even if the process is costly, as a taxpayer I don't mind paying if it means my voice will be heard."

A couple of councillors, however, warned about the potential consequences of carrying the process forward at the local level.

Scott Manjak of Cranbrook reminded directors that the process will drain resources. "If the decision is made to ramp up the staffing, the burden will be on the taxpayer," he said.

Mike Sosnowski of Fernie also mentioned the heavy costs involved. "I'm afraid we don't have the resources to go through the process, but I'm speaking against the motion and I believe we will go through the process, over and over and over again." The comment drew laughter from the audience.

Mr. Wilks of Sparwood ended up being the lone vote in favour of his own motion. He said he would accept the board decision, but added the process would be very onerous for the staff. Some other regional issues will be put on the back burner, he said. "This Jumbo issue is a huge undertaking."

The next step is that the Jumbo resort developers must apply to have the land rezoned. Legally, the board must advertise the application for rezoning, and then conduct a public hearing at which anyone may speak.

Greg Deck, mayor of Radium and chair of the regional board, said after the meeting that the board is bracing itself for a long public hearing.

He said the longest public hearing over a land use issue in the province took place in Delta and lasted 28 days.

Preparations for the public hearing will be scrupulous, he said, because of "the sensitivity and the magnitude" of the issue.

Because both sides in the Jumbo issue have invested so many resources in the battle, the board will almost certainly face a legal challenge from the unsuccessful side after the board makes its decision, he said.

Mr. Deck said he expects that much of the information presented at the public hearing will not be new.

The likelihood of new information coming out at this point is small," he said, adding: "The same fact stated 3,000 times doesn't mean there are 3,000 facts."

However, he said he and the other directors will certainly listen to everyone at the public hearing with an open mind.