

Open the Door to Juniper Ridge

by Richard Burton, Publisher

Open the door, throw open the windows and air out the Bend City Council meetings. Councilors finally agreed on July 19 to release the 13-page Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with Juniper Ridge Partners LLC, revealing the preliminary agreement on the proposed Juniper Ridge 1500 acre development. Ears are pricking up all around Bend as local radio stations air ads urging taxpayers to take note, warning "Juniper Ridge, the future of Bend, is going sideways!"

Sideways is the direction Bend has taken on its route to the cleaners if the Bend City Council approves the mammoth land deal with the California developer. Thankfully, a new political action committee "Citizens For Our Future" was formed by the Central Oregon Builders Association and the Central Oregon Association of Realtors, bringing to light many concerns of this high risk deal.

Once allowed in meetings, the Bend Chamber of Commerce stepped up its action on the matter, delivering a letter to the city last week, stating that the agreement between the two parties violates the state's public meeting laws and contracting code. Deschutes County sold Juniper Ridge to the city for one single dollar twenty years ago, under a special agreement. According to the original agreement, the city must "include opportunities for public involvement in planning and development" of Juniper Ridge. The public has not been involved in the planning of Juniper Ridge. In fact, the public has only just recently been informed of the closed-door meetings with the release of the MOU and the radio ads opposing the use of taxpayers' money without consent.

Perhaps the biggest reason for the "possibly illegal" closed door meetings, creating the smoke and mirrors illusion by the Bend City Council is the breaking of the agreement entered twenty years ago with Deschutes County. The agreement stated that the land was to be used for industrial use only. Under the guise of "evolving during negotiations", negotiations which were smoky at best and supposedly based on input from real estate, financial and marketing experts, both the residential acreage and the residential density increased within the proposed development. Though the original agreement was entered twenty years ago with Deschutes County, what kind of message does that send for the City of Bend to pretend that the stipulation no longer exists? With 500 to 600 acres planned for housing development, industrial use is only part of the new plan proposed behind closed doors.

Topping the list of concerns by the Bend Chamber of Commerce is the request for qualifications (RFQ) by the Bend City Council to submit applications to develop 500 acres of land. Why would the city request an RFQ for 500 acres when the agreement actually applied to 1500 acres? This blunder appears to violate the state's public contracting code. An RFQ for 1500 acres would have allowed other developers to submit their qualifications, making the list of potential developers much longer. Bend residents and business owners need to be aware of this unfair tactic. Furthermore, the Chamber of Commerce has asked that the agreement between Bend and Juniper Ridge Partners LLC be considered a land use decision, since this is primarily a decision based on the future of the use of land. If considered a land use decision, the City of Bend may be in violation of statewide planning goals, state statutes, as well as city and county's development codes. Besides, the city does not have a good track record, recently losing a \$6.6 million dollar lawsuit in the Juniper Utility case. All taxpayers should take notice.

The Bend City Council has envisioned Juniper Ridge to consist of a research and development park, university, town center, homes, and light-industrial businesses, but it has done so without the consent of taxpayers while tossing aside provisions put into place twenty years ago by Deschutes County in the best interest for Bend economic growth. The proposed new mix of uses in no way complements overall development for Bend. The MOU mostly benefits the master developer, not Bend, with almost no accountability or risk on their part.

Council member John Hummel has said, "The community supports Juniper Ridge or knows nothing about it. A few developers who are upset that they are not the master developer oppose it." So, Hummel admits that the community knows nothing about Juniper Ridge. Could that be because executive sessions took place behind closed doors? The community was informed only when the council was good and ready to present their MOU, after a full round of "good ole boy" back-patting with mirrors tilted at certain angles. "Citizens For Our Future" consists of builders and realtors. Why would they be upset about a new development that would only mean a windfall of business, no matter which way you slice it? Because they are also residents of Bend and they don't take lightly to the Bend City Council chunking down taxpayers' money without consent to out-of-state developers. And how can businesses expand without affordable industrial land in Bend, a main concern of Deschutes County back when Juniper Ridge was sold? More homes should not be built until there is a balance between homes, businesses and jobs.

Chamber of Commerce President Mike Schmidt reminded the councilors, saying that the decision is “probably one of the most important in your career.” He went on to say, “We advise the city to slow down, evaluate the direction you’re heading, and change course.” The chamber’s 1500 members “want to see the best financial deal for the city, at the least financial risk possible.” The main concern of the Chamber and one that needs to be yelled from the rooftops of every home in Bend is the amount to be paid to the developer. Under the current proposal, Juniper Ridge Partners, LLC can sell 25 percent of the housing and light industrial property and all of the multi-family housing units while also garnering a management fee. This is Oregon, not dirt-poor Mississippi, one of the poorest states in the nation. Why city councilors feel compelled to pay a California developer a 20 percent rate of return is mind-boggling. Under the current proposal, the city would receive 65 percent of the first \$100 million in sales when the land is reportedly worth \$500 million. It is in the best interest of Bend and the taxpayers to completely start the process over, reopening Juniper Ridge to new bidders while keeping the city doors wide open.

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