

# Targhee gets Resort status

Alliance pledges continued vigilance to ensure stewardship of public lands.

By Franz J. Camenzind, Executive Director

On Feb. 4, the resort-that-wanted-to-be came to be when the Teton Board of County Commissioners voted 4 to 1 on each of the three proposals that gave Grand Targhee official resort status with all its development potential. This includes a buildout of 450 units, 150,000 square feet of commercial space, a sheriff's station, a medical facility, and an estimated average occupancy of 2,500 to 3,000 people on 120 acres of private land at the end of Ski Hill Road. The resort is completely surrounded by national forest land and is adjacent to the Jedediah Smith Wilderness Area and only a few miles west of Grand Teton National Park.

The Conservation Alliance and a dedicated group of Alta residents can claim some success in helping reduce the scale of the resort from what was originally proposed (see sidebar), but the impacts of this expansion will still be huge.

The greatest single value of Targhee is its location in the midst of some of the most spectacular reaches of publicly owned land in the United States – land that is home to grizzly bears, wolverine, lynx, elk, deer, moose and a very tenuous population of big-horn sheep. All of these and dozens of other bird and mammal species will be impacted in some way by this resort, and wilderness values will be degraded.

The privilege of operating a large, private business within these surroundings comes with a deep stewardship responsibility. The Conservation Alliance will continue to follow the growth of this resort and insist that everything that can be done to protect wildlands and wildlife will be done. Stewardship responsibility does not end with the permit – it begins there.

## Resort plan coulda been better, coulda been worse...

- Right now, Grand Targhee has 96 lodging units and about 37,000 sq. ft. of commercial space.
- The National Forest's 1994 record of decision regarding expansion at Targhee (while all the land was still public) would have allowed 686 units and 136,248 sq. ft. of commercial space, without any provision for exaction fees or conservation easements.
- After a 2004 land swap resulted in 120 acres at the base of Targhee becoming privately owned, the property was zoned rural. Using density bonuses, this allowed for a total buildout of 127 units.
- The owner's original application for resort zoning at the end of 2004 asked for a total of 875 lodging and residential units, plus 178,000 sq. ft. of commercial space.
- The application approved on Feb. 4 allows 450 total units, including employee housing, on site. Most of these – 360 units – must be designed as short-term lodging. County commissioners also okayed a total of 150,000 sq. ft. of space for commercial and resort services, amenities and support. As mitigation, the owner promised to protect 600 acres of land elsewhere with conservation easements and to pay \$500,000 to help offset anticipated infrastructure needs in the Alta area. A 1 percent annual real-estate transfer fee will also be set up to fund acquisition of open-space lands or conservation easements on quality open space in Teton County, Idaho, and Teton County, Wyo.

Growth of the resort will forever change the community of Alta. It will accelerate the explosion of land values, which will in turn stimulate development, converting what is now the single largest agricultural district in Teton County, Wyo., to residential use. Much of this will be high-end development that will come with a significant amount of second-home ownership.

In an attempt to address citizen concerns, the resort owners at this last hearing voluntarily offered to purchase conservation easements on at least 301 acres of land in the Alta area. This addition to the 299 acres of conservation easement land already promised to offset the impacts to public lands is sincerely appreciated, but is deemed by many to be too little, too late.

The decision ends 20 years of debate over Targhee's future, which began with the first proposal to privatize what was then land leased from the Forest Service at the base of the ski hill. This parcel became a private inholding in 2004 through a land exchange. The owners then applied for Targhee to be rezoned as a resort, and to be allowed to develop lodging and associated facilities on their 120 acres. The rest is now history – proving once again that developers need win only once while conservationists keep having to fight the same battles.

Targhee's expansion will forever impact this magnificent region, changing the very fabric of the west slope of the Tetons – how much will depend on the conservation commitment of the owners and the continued vigilance of a concerned public. ■

## The last resort?

When the current Comprehensive Plan was adopted in 1994, three sites were granted resort status – the Snow King and Teton Village ski areas and Astoria Hot Springs. A few years later, Jackson Hole Golf and Tennis was added and in 2005, SRA's Teton Village Resort expansion plan was approved.

The Comp Plan describes a resort as a facility utilizing a natural feature and providing significant public access and benefit. The ski areas fit the description, Astoria Hot Springs fit at the time (see Snake River Canyon Ranch on Page 15), but as for Golf and Tennis, we argued unsuccessfully that a golf course did not meet the requirements of a natural feature. During the early Comp Plan debates, Grand Targhee was identified as a likely resort if and when the then publicly owned land was ever privatized, which happened in 2004. Targhee's application for resort zoning was granted Feb. 4.

Resorts are development unknowns. The applicant can ask for almost anything, and the community has to find the legal means to say no, require

a reduction in scale or absorb the impacts. Resorts are also growth engines by nature and can have severe impacts on existing infrastructure. They also require many service employees – people often least able to afford to live in the community – thus adding to housing shortages.

A recent Save Historic Jackson Hole study reported that nearly 4 million sq. ft. of total building space already approved in the four existing resorts has not yet been built. One million square feet of that is designated commercial space. (This compares to some 750,000 sq. ft. of existing commercial space in the Jackson town core.) Additional lodging for nearly 5,000 people has been approved in the resort districts, but not yet built. These figures do not include Grand Targhee numbers.

The Conservation Alliance strongly urges the community to insist that the new Comp Plan eliminate the Resort Zone as a future zoning option. It should be a first priority to make Grand Targhee the last resort.