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Keweenaw residents divided over ski resort plan

JOHN FLESHER
■ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

LAC LA BELLE — It's easy to see why people care so passionately about the Keweenaw Peninsula. Extending some 80 miles into Lake Superior on the northwest tip of the Upper Peninsula, the Keweenaw is one of nature's showpieces: rocky beaches, hills offering sweeping lake vistas, forests where bears fatten up on wild thimbleberries, streams and waterfalls galore.

Once home to mines that inspired the nickname "Copper Country," the Keweenaw's small towns and woodlands have become a haven for retirees and tourists — and a battleground over increasing development.

At the center of the debate is a planned ski hill on Mount Bohemia, near the peninsula's tip. A Detroit-area company is building what it boasts will be the Midwest's "premier ski area," featuring a 900-foot vertical drop — the steepest between the East Coast and the Rockies.

A December opening is scheduled, despite bitter opposition from some residents who say the resort would damage the environment, disrupt the pastoral lifestyle they treasure and trigger an avalanche of growth. Supporters say the project would boost the area economy, which has struggled since copper mining died out in the 1960s.

The feud has torn the traditionally close-knit region with accusations of selfishness, lawsuit threats and apparent vandalism at the construction site.

"It's changed people's lives. The stress level is amazing," says resident Barb Battersby, 38. "This has always been a place of refuge. Now it's a place of conflict."

Residents of Keweenaw County will vote in November on whether to give the hill a more development-friendly zoning designation.

Opposition is especially intense in Lac La Belle, a lakeside hamlet at the base of Mount Bohemia. Many of the residents are retirees who don't want a resort nearby.

"The silence is deafening, and on a clear night, you feel like you're two or three feet from touching the stars," says Ken Korhorn, who arrived from Grand Rapids in 1995.

"But it's like Humpty Dumpty. The beauty is incredibly fragile,



JOHN FLESHER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Cabin owner Paul Campbell is opposed to the building of a ski resort, claiming it would damage the Upper Peninsula environment and wreck the pastoral lifestyle he treasures.

And once it's broken, you can't put it back together again."

Robert Piche, a former miner and logger, built a summer camp in Lac La Belle 30 years ago and now lives there all year. From his back yard, he gazes across the lake at Mount Bohemia, where ski runs carved into the tree-covered hillside are clearly visible.

"They won't stop with just a ski hill," Piche says. "That's just to get their foot in the door. They'll have

condos and golf courses ..."

But in the nearby village of Copper Harbor, convenience store operator Carol Meilahn dismisses the opposition.

"They have their piece of paradise and don't want it to change," she says. "Change is inevitable; the question is what kind. A ski hill is a good, clean development, no smokestacks. Would you rather have a sawmill? A nuclear plant?"

Restaurant owner Don Kauppi says logging and tourism are about the only ways to earn a living with the mines gone, and tourism is seasonal. Keweenaw County, whose population of 1,701 is smallest in Michigan, had jobless rates of 3.3 percent in July, but 12.9 percent in January.

"Only 20 percent of Copper Harbor is open in winter," Kauppi says. "We're off the beaten path, and building any kind of industry here is just plain hard. We need to be able to offer year-round paychecks, raise the tax base, become a more complete community."

The ski resort developer is Crosswinds Communities Inc. of Novi, which is leasing the Mount Bohemia property from Lake Superior Land Co., which owns 150,000 acres in Keweenaw County.

Lake Superior Land was established to manage the mining company's vast acreage after the mines closed. It's now a subsidiary

of International Paper Co.

Bob Grasseschi, retired president of Lake Superior Land, says the company always envisioned "careful" development in the Keweenaw, including a ski hill on Mount Bohemia.

He says "environmental extremists" repeatedly have shot down development proposals, hoping the company would sell its property to preservationists.

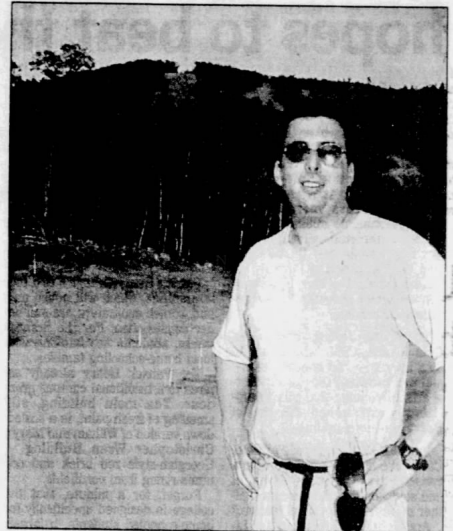
"They fought the mines and the pulp mills," he says. "They always said they wanted 'sustainable development' like ski hills, but now they're fighting that too."

Some ski hill foes have urged International Paper to sell land to the Nature Conservancy, which has opened a Keweenaw office. But they deny opposing all development.

"It can be done, but slowly and carefully," says Paul Freshwater of Eagle Harbor. "People ... come for the view, and if you mess that up, they won't come back."

Crosswinds insists it has no intention of turning the Keweenaw into a pricey, crowded tourist mecca. The ski hill will blend nicely with its surroundings, company spokesman Lonie Glibberman says.

"There won't be a shopping center, fudge shops or movie theaters," he says. "If we're going to build the best wilderness ski area in the Midwest, we've got to keep



MARSHALL ANDERSON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Lonie Glibberman, spokesman for a development called Crosswinds Communities, stands before two of several runs planned at the controversial Mount Bohemia ski mountain in rural Keweenaw County.

the wilderness."

The five-year plan calls for building several dozen ski runs, up to four lifts, a lodge and 50 cabins, Glibberman says. In summer, the resort would offer activities such as kayaking and mountain biking.

Critics question whether the ski hill can survive in such a remote area — nearly 600 miles from Detroit — when other ski areas closer to urban centers have failed.

But Glibberman says Mount Bohemia will be profitable because its unique features and skiing challenges.

Paul Campbell, who lives in Calumet and has a cabin at Lac La Belle, says opposition leaders don't condone vandalism. But standing at the base of the hill and gazing at uprooted trees and rubbish piles where ski runs are being cut, he says it's hard not to be angry.

"They're just destroying it," he says. "It's morally wrong. I don't care whose land it is."

Land-use battles spring up across 'Midwest's last frontier'

JOHN FLESHER
■ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

BETE GRIS — During the copper mining heyday a century and more ago, the northern tip of the Keweenaw Peninsula buzzed with activity.

A creek that now trickles placidly into Bete Gris Bay on the peninsula's eastern Lake Superior shore was then a canal for ships hauling coal for smelting and stamping operations.

With mining gone, nature reclaimed the area. Rare species, including bald eagles and loons, have taken up residence in swamplands ringing Bete Gris Bay. Now people are coming back.

Lake Superior Land Co., which owns 150,000 acres in Keweenaw County, is planning a housing development overlooking the bay. It wants to drain less than one acre of wetlands and build an access road south of the creek.

The Michigan Department of Environmental Quality in July denied a request for permits, saying the project would do excessive damage.

Development opponents are urging the DEQ to stand firm.

"This is a world-class natural resource," says Gary Kohls, a Royal Oak businessman and owner of a historic lighthouse at the mouth of the creek. "Here's where salmon lay their eggs and whitefish come in. Wolves pass through. It's an incredibly special place."

Lake Superior Land has modified its design, has sold about half of three dozen lots and is seeking mediation with the DEQ.

The project would generate badly needed tax revenue for local governments, says Tom Beveridge, a township supervisor. "The area is developing whether we want it or not, and there's going to be more and more demand for services," he says.

The dispute is one of several land-use battles that illustrate Keweenaw's growing desirability. Residents of nearby Mount Bohemia are divided over a ski hill development. And Lake Superior Land Co. has offered 22,000 Keweenaw acres to the state in exchange for about

37,000 acres in Houghton County.

The deal would shield the Keweenaw land, including Lake Superior shoreline, streams and inland lakes, from development. But it has drawn fire from sporting groups who hunt and fish in Houghton County.

A Department of Natural Resources analysis also raised doubts about the exchange. For now, says Lake Superior Land spokesman Mark Pontti, it's off the table.

But the company hasn't given up on Bete Gris. Pontti believes most Keweenaw residents support the project. But he acknowledges land use is likely to become an increasingly hot-button issue in the region, which he calls the Midwest's "last frontier."

On that much, his opponents agree.

"It's really a jewel, the last place in Michigan that's like this," says Bobbie Freshwater of Eagle Harbor, whose family roots in Keweenaw extend 150 years. "It doesn't surprise me that people would want to come here. But once the beauty's gone, it's gone."