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The Flint Journal | Flint, Michigan, Monday, December 9, 1974 | SECTION D

Suits endanger Tyrone Twp. project

Resort's future is shaky

By ROGER P. WELSHANS
Journal Fenton Bureau

FENTON — A year ago it started amid beauty queens, hoopla and high hopes. Today, it lies dormant, suit-ridden and in doubt.

And at least one company employe can't figure out why.

When Outdoor Resorts of America (ORA) first announced plans for a camping resort for recreational vehicles in Livingston County's Tyrone Twp., it was going to be a $20-million project.

State and local officials were on hand to proclaim the project. A former Miss America doled out smiles and press releases. Everyone was happy.

The project rolled along smoothly until about four months ago. Then the State Attorney General's office and the Livingston County prosecutor filed suits alleging violations of the state Land Sales Act and sale of land without licenses.

Shortly after that, the company was jolted again. The four owners who had sold Tyrone Hills Golf Course to ORA on a land contract brought suit for payment defaults.

Company officials, reeling from the suits and a depressed economy, began cutting back.

It now has shrunk from 2,500 sites covering 500 acres to 777 sites. The number of swimming pools and tennis courts has been reduced. Telephones have been disconnected and offices abandoned.

Estimates now place the cost of the project at $7 million. The fate of a proposed ski slope and par-3 golf course is uncertain.

About all that remains are the signs. They stand as reminders of what could have been, or still may be. Continuing legal thunderstorms leave the future of the project clouded.

Trial dates have not been set. Arrest warrants for four salesmen have not been served.

Some camping sites were supposed to be ready now. They remain snow covered and uncompleted.

What happened, and why?

Edward E. Bowen, director of the Tyrone Hills project, isn't sure.

"I don't even know if I can recap what happened," he said. "There never has been a campground like ours platted in Michigan. We were a hybrid. We were confusing to a lot of people and there was a breakdown in our communications with them."

Outdoor Resorts of America is based in Nashville, Tenn. It owns four projects in Tennessee similar to the one proposed in Tyrone Twp., and one in Florida.

The company has press agents, directors, engineers and lawyers scattered in several states.

Bowen, who developed a similar project in Northport and who has worked for Disney World and other resort firms, said:

"We spent a lot of time locally making sure we were building exactly what people wanted. But we were spread a little thin. Because of that, we lost credibility with the state."

When questioned by state agencies began to come in, they came in clusters. Officials thought they had the needed permission from the state to proceed. They soon found out they were wrong.

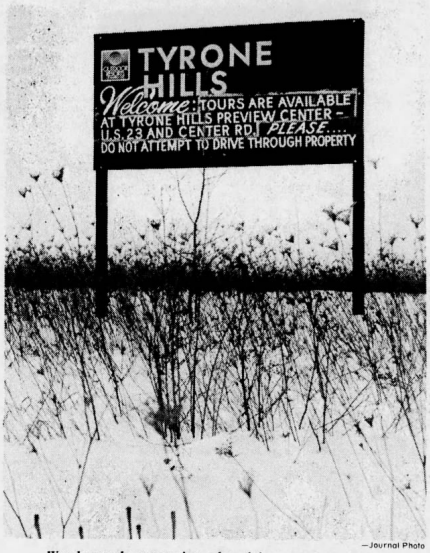
Before it is over, agencies concerned with the environment, public health, waste water, real estate and land sales will have to have their questions answered.

"State agencies thought, 'here is an out-of-state firm that is going to come in here and rape our land'," Bowen said. "I really think this whole thing started when the state agencies got jealous about a firm from another state developing their land.

"When all the suits started, we couldn't believe it, so we turned the other cheek. Then we got hit on the other one.

"There still is no question in my mind that this will be the finest resort of its kind in the country, and I have been associated with several resorts, so I can compare.

"I am not bitter about where the project is today, which is in limbo. But I am disappointed about the circumstances that make people think we are less of a company than we are."



—Journal Photo

Weeds nearly cover sign advertising resort project

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