

FROM: Joan M. Cory, Ph.D.
15075 Dell Road
Bozeman, MT 59715
406-587-3523

TO: Bridger Canyon Planning and Zoning Commission
Planning Department, Room 208
311 West Main Street
Bozeman, MT 59715

DATE: April 17, 2007

RE: Bridger Canyon Partners PUD Hearing (revised)

Dear Commissioners,

As a Bridger Canyon resident for 16 years, and a BCPOA director for six, I have concerns about the current application with regard to the health and safety of residents of Bridger Canyon. To approve this application, benefits to the community of Bridger Canyon residents must be demonstrated. In addition, potential benefits must outweigh the risks of development. I will address one such area of risk: the increased danger of serious wildfire, the increased danger that such fire will spread, and the difficulty of evacuating canyon residents because of fire, or high smoke levels, beginning in this high density housing development. We've all seen TV footage of wildfires in conjunction with mountain housing structures; realize the risks to area residents, fire fighters, and wildlife; and must consider the proposed application from this perspective.

Let me first acknowledge that BCP has made modifications on this issue in its recent application, to wit, a fire station and truck are listed as items of significant benefit to the community. This would pertain to some 30 upper canyon residents outside of the proposed development, but primarily to the residents and guests of the development itself. Phase I alone would increase the canyon population by 33% and, as most wildfires result from human activity, creates a significant additional fire threat. This fire station, then, only mitigates a problem that the development creates in the first place.

But let's look a little closer.

In Bridger Canyon is a wild land fire - urban interface area, largely forested, and protected by a volunteer fire department, much of which travels from town to fight fires that may take only minutes to exceed control. My family has observed at least two fires get out of hand from our living room window and these were in a relatively un-forested area. Our fire-fighting force travels a two-lane state highway, and must often ascend steep, gravel-, snow-, or ice-covered roads. Fire fighting agencies are looking more and more to billing residents for the costs of fighting structure fires in such areas. Forests are under attack by spruce budworm, which is expected to leave much standing dead timber for fuel. Drought cycles, global warming, or whatever it is that leaves trees, shrubs, and grasses bone dry can be expected to produce significant wildfires in the future. Equipment, communications, and manpower are already stretched and response times compromised, especially considering potential evacuation of residents in concert with high-paced emergency vehicle traffic from our current rural fire station, let alone from Bozeman.

Given this situation and the other reasons presented during this hearing, BCPOA opposes the BCP PUD application because it does not provide significant community benefit to Bridger Canyon. If the PUD were approved, BCPOA supports each of the original requests and concerns of the Bridger Canyon Rural Fire District for an adequate base area fire station, equipment, water, and roads. This request included a one acre lot, fire station with multiple bays (built for accommodating firefighter residency with insulation, heat, water, utilities, etc), fire trucks, and all necessary emergency equipment.

Even with such a condition fulfilled, however, there are additional considerations that must be addressed:

Construction. Most wildfires start with people, who are prone to inattentive burning, smoking, campfires, or construction fires. Increased fire fighting capability must be provided before construction starts.

Staffing. A BCPOA director and volunteer firefighter writes: “Another matter that needs additional consideration is the [proposed] fire station at the base area. Although this is a well intentioned attempt ... to provide a " ‘community benefit’ ..., as a firefighter, I am having some difficulty with the operational reality of such a scenario. Aside from the fact that ... such a station could provide additional support for a handful of the current residents in the upper canyon, as well as the new residents and guests at the Base Area, the reality of staffing and providing a quick response time from such a station is another matter entirely. The biggest challenge for our all volunteer department ... is ‘people’, ...finding a sufficient number of qualified, dedicated individuals from within the Bridger Canyon community to serve on the department. The majority of our new recruits are from the city of Bozeman.... Is BCP suggesting that [our fire department] ... is going to be in a position to staff the base area fire station? Have they offered to provide salary support to allow the department to provide a 24 hour ‘quick response time’ to the residents...? The mechanics and operational details of this [proposed] satellite station should be addressed; [we can’t] ..., simply assume that it a good and workable idea from the outset.’

Number and Distribution of housing units. Phase I of the proposed development comprises a large number of units widely dispersed over the base area, rather than the consolidated guest services originally envisioned. This would be essentially a high density subdivision located in a highly sensitive environmental area.

All of those individual structures render it more difficult to fight fires than if units were consolidated. Individual ownership of units makes it less likely that fire protection measures will be understood, adhered to, and enforced. High density population in multiple low occupancy structures spread out over a large area in a wild land fire – urban interface area -- puts everyone in the canyon at risk. The focus on and difficulty of preserving all those individual structures means a higher probability that fire will spread to the treetops and beyond. As another director put it, “you have 3 options: [1] attach structures to make efficient use of defensible space, [2] detach [structures as proposed] and cut a lot of trees ..., [3] or pray there's no big fire.”

Evacuation routes. It is already the case that during morning and afternoon rush hour on a good snow day, our two-lane state highway is essentially a one-lane road. Those of us a left turn away from travel on the Bridger Canyon highway, as well as an increasing number heavy construction vehicles, know to take Jackson Creek Road or Kelly Canyon Road instead, no matter what the condition of these narrow roads. This would certainly be the case if emergency vehicles were en route to an emergency or disaster situation up the canyon. And let us not forget recent skier parking on the roadway. So, the traffic questions now include: Can existing secondary roads

support thousands of canyon residents during a disaster? What would traffic flow be in the case of heavy smoke? If more than 1000 cars can be on the highway and can get out in three hours, how would we accomplish emergency evacuation requiring quick action?

Enforcement: We are concerned that an adequate fire protection plan be developed, instituted, and enforced. It is not acceptable, for instance, to fail to maintain hydrant pressure and accessibility as other homeowners near the proposed development have already done. BCPOA supports strict enforcement of fire regulations and remediation measures for noncompliance.

Road Slope: We are concerned that some of the proposed road grades exceed 6%, some as high as 9%, and will prove inaccessible to fire trucks particularly in inclement weather.

Propane: We are concerned with the proposed reliance on individual propane tanks and truck traffic, rather than use of more efficient propane distribution within accommodation pods or even the incorporation of renewable energy sources.

In event of a fire not controlled by initial attack forces, we face a significant fire situation in the canyon. BCPOA strongly supports strict adherence to the recommendations outlined in the Fire Protection Plan with particular emphasis on water availability and accessible roads. The BCP development must not pose a safety hazard for residents in the canyon and if it should be approved, the commissioners must address the adequacy of fire protection and emergency services infrastructure. I question whether it possible to bring the number of proposed structures, people, vehicles, and activities to Bridger Canyon without causing a significant detriment, rather than benefit, to Bridger Canyon and its residents. A special concern is the number and distribution of proposed structures. Based on these considerations, I cannot support the proposed PUD application and I ask that you do not support it, either.