

\$12M spent on \$200M project and ground still not turned

Environmentalists detain destination resort

By Bob Spiwak

A heavy fog and three feet of snow cover the tiny settlement of Mazama, Wash., producing a landscape as dead as the dreams of a massive four-season resort at Early Winters, up the road.

That is the scenario painted by a Seattle newspaper, which stressed that the Early Winters Corp. was broke.

Corporate president Harry Hosey sees it differently, although admitting the threatened spotted owl may hold the ultimate fate of the resort in its talons.

Located in northwest Washington's Okanogan County in the eastern foothills of the Cascade Mountains, the proposed resort has had a history more stormy than a mountain blizzard over the past 20 years.

Long fought by environmentalists, with the Methow Valley Citizens' Council leading the attack, abetted by heavyweights like the Sierra Club, the fray has divided not only the community, but families as well.

First planned as a moderate-sized destination ski resort by the Aspen Corp., the project grew in size and expense. It became a proposed destination four-season resort, at one time planning for as many as 8,000 skiers on the hill at one time.

A golf course was added to the plans in the 1980s and architect Robert Muir Graves was hired to lay out the initial 18 holes and "golf academy" while providing for another 18.

A report stated that the resort had run out of money, that Hosey, who had laid off his staff of five, was in debt to consulting and engineering firms as well as Okanogan County, which had advanced \$30,000 for a sewer study. The corporation has spent almost \$12 million on the proposed \$200-million resort, and not a permit has been issued.

Portraying reports of bankruptcy as "almost totally garbage," Hosey said he had "the total support of my partners."

"My preference now is not to generate controversy or be in the media," he said. But, he and the resort are both in the media throughout Washington, where the spotted owl, a threatened species, is either loved by environmentalists or hated by the timber industry.

Hosey admitted that if the owl's presence at the resort site is documented, the project is doomed and he will sell off the base property of 1,200 acres. The golf course is located on that land.

The owls are nowhere near the golf site, if they even exist in the general area. Picture a persimmon driver; the ski hill would be at the top of the hotel on 6,000-foot Sandy Butte, which is national forest land.

At the toe of the club, extending halfway across the top, is the private land owned by Early Winters.

Forest Service biologists, possibly as far back as 1984, and definitely four years later, noted the butte as potential owl habitat and ordered further study. No spotted owls were seen in a 1988 survey.

In 1990, the Forest Service made a decision that confirmed (owl) "pair-occupancy" on Sandy Butte. "Right in the restaurant" (site), Hosey said.

At that time the hill was declared

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an Owl Habitat Conservation Area, and Hosey felt "the regulations were not onerous and did not preclude development."

Last September, however, Forest Service chief biologist Grant Gunderson advised that the ski hill project was dead, according to

Hosey. It was decided that removal of trees for the ski runs would lessen the "canopy" required by the little owls.

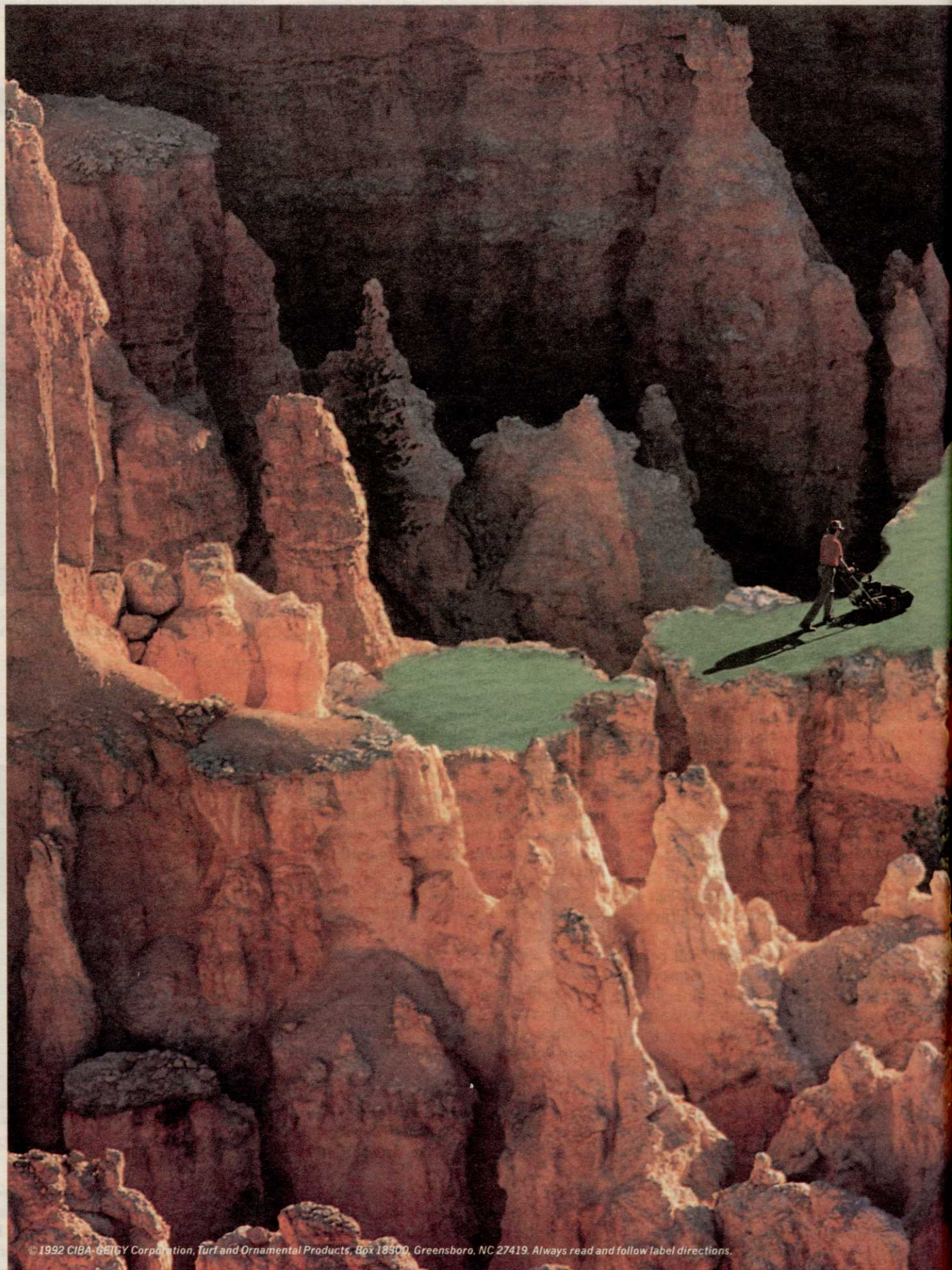
The issue is under review by the Forest Service, again. Hosey has no thoughts of only a summer resort on the 1,200-acre private tract.

No golf resort. Four-seasons is the only economically viable package, he feels.

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Architect Damion Pascuzzo had visited the site of the golf course two years ago with his boss, Graves. They were awestruck by the beauty of the alpine, cliff-surrounded setting. Pascuzzo, now designer for

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Methow Valley, home of the wouldbe Early Wionters resort, offers spectacular views in every direction.

Photo by Bob Spiwak

Early Winters

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Graves, along with associate Neal Meagher, said the firm's efforts on the course are still in the preliminary phases.

The course is on paper, but "...we haven't been given the full go-ahead," he said.

Meagher noted that any final plans depend on whether the project would call for 18 or 36 holes.

John Hayes, a local landscape consultant, is working quietly to put together "interested parties" who might purchase the resort if early Winters Corp. puts it up for

sale. Long a champion of retaining the rural character of the Methow Valley (there are less than 5,000 residents in its 70-mile length), he would favor a much smaller version than the present grandiose plans.

"Any kind of a resort, scaled down, would need a mix of golf and skiing to be economically effective," Hayes said.

When asked if the golf project would be started again from scratch, should his plan materialize, he replied, "I would guess you dance with the one that brought you," indicating that the Graves organization would remain on the job.

Citizens' Council attorney David Bricklin noted: "The number of hurdles that Hosey had to jump was increasing, not decreasing. Long before the spotted owl reared its head, Hosey was in a lot of trouble."

Vicki Welch, co-chairman of the Methow Valley Citizens' Council, asked her reaction to the story, said: "I feel joy. We were expecting something like this... We ran into people last summer who had done work for him (Hosey) who had not been paid."

Asked if the environmental group she leads would oppose a smaller resort, she said there would probably be no resistance to a scaled-down project. "It depends, of course, on the specifics of the project, and it would have to be examined for environmental impact."

Early Winters Corp. follows Aspen and Methow Recreation, Inc. as corporate entities attempting to produce a resort over the past two decades. A major blow was suffered in 1989 when the U.S. Supreme Court found the Forest Service Environmental Impact Statement faulty in certain areas, which delayed the permitting process.

That opponents of the project prevailed before the high court came as a surprise to backers, who were already mentally waxing skis and chipping to Graves' velvet greens.

Since then, it has been a downhill slalom for Early Winters and Hosey, who predicted ground would be broken for the golf course in 1991.

Then, still to be resolved is a matter of water usage involving the Yakima and Colville Indian nations. Water consumption for golf and artificial snow may impact the aquifer, according to the Department of Ecology, and with overuse it could limit or destroy fish spawning grounds which the Native Americans claim were given them in an 1888 treaty.

Ironically, in the early 1980s, public sentiment favored a small four-seasons resort. But as the plans got bigger, opposition grew. The corporation's energies and treasury have been expended on defending itself, on planning and consultants and attorneys in order to obtain the necessary permits.

In Northwest Indian lore, when the owl calls your name, you are going to die. The owl, a spotted one, may have called "Early Winters."

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