

Lionsback Resort project begins on Sand Flats Road

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Twelve years after a plan to develop a hotel and housing subdivision on State lands near Sand Flats Recreation Area was first entertained by the Moab City Council, followed by a couple of lawsuits, the developers of Lionsback Resort have broken ground just up the hill from the Community Recycle Center.



Heavy equipment and stacked piping at the site of the now-under-construction Lionsback Resort. Photo by Doug McMurdo

“This first phase is the first 34 casitas,” said John Dwight, president of Lionsback developer Invent Development Partners.

The initial work entails getting infrastructure to the site. Pipe is stacked and heavy equipment is situated on Sand Flats Road just up the hill from the Community Recycle Center. Dwight, whose family was until recently involved with Moab’s Gonzo Inn, said he is essentially heading up the 175-acre project after working more in a background role at the project’s rocky beginning.

Invent Development Partners are working off the original agreement the Moab City Council approved in 2009. Earlier this year, the Utah Court of Appeals ruled the developer and property seller —the Utah Schools and Institutional Trust Lands Administration — could not make major changes to the plan without holding a public hearing.

Here’s a brief background: The initial plan was challenged in court and the developers prevailed. Then the housing meltdown and subsequent recession put the controversial plan on hold until 2016, when the developer returned to the city with a revised proposal that would have tripled the number of hotels, parking spaces and other aspects of the project.

The City declined requests from citizens to hold a public

hearing and the project was litigated for a second time. The appellate court ruled the city had to go through the public hearing process and the Utah Supreme Court recently denied the city's request for relief. But the original 2009 plan was still valid.

That proposal was for a 50-room hotel and 34 casitas, which means "little house" in Spanish. The amendment added 100 additional hotel rooms and a significantly larger footprint. "There were some other differences but this is the major difference," said City Engineer Chuck Williams.

City Manager Joel Linares said developers Dwight and Mike Badger's original 2009 proposal is still vested, giving the firm leeway to break ground. The City of Moab will have oversight of the project, which was not something that was always on the table because state law allows SITLA to develop projects without input from local authorities.

From Dwight's perspective, Lionsback Resort will provide a benefit to the community. He said while the SITLA land the project sits on butts up to Sand Flats Recreation Area — the Hell's Revenge 4X4 trail runs through it — access will not be cut off. Indeed, access to other trails will be maintained, he said.

It's also unclear if a hotel of any size will ever be built, but Dwight said a total of 188 single-family homes will be

constructed and that would still leave 70% of the property designated as open space.

"What we're doing now is bringing infrastructure up the hill from town and we're working with the city on the first 34 casitas," said Dwight. "But with the state of the world today, and COVID, we'll decide the hotel in the future."

Dwight couldn't ballpark a figure on what the average cost would be for one of the single-family homes given the "moving target" that is construction costs. "I don't have any idea," he said.

But he does have an idea how controversial the project is and wants locals to know his company is "all about the outdoors. There will be access to trails. People won't want anyone hiking across their property, of course, but there will always be access. I think this will be a great benefit for the county."