

Talk to the community — and listen.

Do a thorough environmental analysis.

Pay attention to conflicts with **grizzly bears**.

Those are just some of the comments in the mix from elected leaders in Montana regarding the proposal to expand Holland Lake Lodge, a private resort operating on public land. The thousands of people commenting include U.S. Sen. Jon Tester, county commissioners and state legislators.

"There's a way to be part of a community," said Rep. Mike Hopkins, R-Missoula, whose district includes the Holland Lake area. "There's a way to get community buy-in. And there's a way not to."

This week, Hopkins said people in the Swan Valley want to be included in conversations about how growth happens, especially for a project he believes will have a major impact on recreation. In a phone call and a letter, he criticized the lack of engagement with the community from POWDR, the Utah-based ski resort company that plans to buy the lodge and already owns minority shares — although POWDR pushed back against his criticism.

"These are good people," Hopkins said in an earlier letter submitted as a comment to the U.S. Forest Service. "They are not opposed to development. They are, however, opposed to an out of state interest coming into their community and tearing up the place without any consultation, and they are rightfully furious about it."

Lodge owner Christian Wolfheil has managed the resort for 20 years, and he has said he'd like to see it upgraded into a sustainable establishment with solar and improved infrastructure, some of which is in disrepair. The plan calls for going from 50 overnight guests to 90 or as many as 156 — the Forest Service puts peak season camping there at 500 — and extending at least some services into winter.

In an earlier interview, Wolfheil said he's ready to sell the lodge, and he has received interest from buyers that some Montanans wouldn't appreciate, but he believes in POWDR's ethic. For example, he notes the company has a vice president of sustainability.

In an email, POWDR shared examples of times it has been in touch with the community. Stacey Hutchinson, vice president for communications and government affairs, said Hopkins' mother, Vondene Kopetski, represented him at two meetings and on a tour of the lodge, and POWDR was pleased to have her join and surprised to see the letter from Hopkins.

"I am, of course, open to (a call or meeting) whenever convenient for Mr. Hopkins," Hutchinson said.

Kopetski confirmed she represented her son on the ground — he was traveling out of state and wanted to be sure his constituents knew he was concerned about the proposal, she said. She also said she believes her son's letter accurately represents how people feel about the plan, and she urged the Forest Service to take more input from the public.

"The community is coming to it so late because the owners did not provide transparency," said Kopetski, also chair of the Missoula County Republicans. "I think most elected officials believe that a lot more time needs to be given to the citizens of Montana to come in on this and become more aware of what is actually going on."

The expansion proposal to the Forest Service is dated April 2022, and the announcement to the public from the Flathead National Forest is dated September 1. The Forest Service had extended public comment through Oct. 7 after public outcry, and the agency has said a second round of public comments will be opened again in the future.

In the meantime, the Forest Service said last week it is working to clarify the actual acreage in use on the property, most recently permitted on paper for 15 acres, according to the agency.

In a letter, the Missoula County Commissioners submitted lengthy comment as well, calling for "an outcome that works for the community, the lodge owners and the Forest Service." They said their primary concern is the preliminary decision to grant the project a "categorical exclusion," or an exception to an environmental assessment or environmental impact statement.

The plan under review for the Forest Service calls for increasing overnight capacity to as many as 156 visitors, and the county commissioners note that means an increase from 11,340 user days per year to 46,980 user days per year for overnight guests alone.

"This dramatic increase in visitation, especially with use extending farther into the fall, would inevitably impact and create conflicts with **grizzly bears** during a time when the species is consuming more food as it nears denning," the commissioners said in their letter to the Forest Service. "The risk to **grizzly bears** is two-fold: a potential for more bear-human conflicts, which ultimately leads to more bears being relocated or euthanized, and an increase in users to the area, possibly resulting in disturbance to core grizzly bear habitat."

In a phone call, state Sen. Shannon O'Brien, D-Missoula, said the people of the Swan Valley have spoken about their desires to keep Holland Lake pristine, and they've been unequivocal. She said community members packed meeting rooms, and Democrats, Republicans, Libertarians and others were aligned against the expansion.

"So that having been said, I do believe in government process, and I would think that lots of things would have to change in order for this to be acceptable, and I'm curious if that's possible," O'Brien said.

More than 6,500 comments on the project have been logged in an online Forest Service "reading room." Save Holland Lake, a group that formed to fight the expansion, said its analysis showed nearly 99 percent of the letters oppose the plan, and spokesperson Bill Lombardi has also wondered what the administrative process is when members of the public are asked to comment on a plan that contains inaccurate information, pointing to the open question about acreage.

In a letter, Sen. Tester, D-Montana, urged Flathead National Forest Supervisor Kurt Steele to be sure that members of the public were heard, and he praised the Forest Service for extending an earlier comment period. He too urged a more extensive environmental review than the Forest Service preliminarily planned.

"I believe that the Forest Service should also carefully consider whether the proposed categorical exclusion from additional environmental review is appropriate for this proposal," Tester wrote. "The public comments after the public meeting indicate a great deal of concern remain regarding environmental, social and economic impacts."

"It is important for Montanans and new neighbors to be able to discuss management of public lands and understand a full picture of impacts of any proposal on the local community. I believe a more detailed analysis would ensure responsible development of resources and consider impacts beyond the physical footprint of this permit."

In a statement provided from his office, Republican Gov. Greg Gianforte also asked decision-makers to hear out locals: "While this is a federal issue, the governor consistently encourages all parties to listen to the voices of impacted, local communities."

Last week, the Forest Service confirmed it still had not made a decision about whether to do an environmental assessment, more thorough environmental impact statement, or grant an exception. However, public information officer Tami MacKenzie said she expected a decision within a week or two.

POWDR's Hutchinson said the company is keeping [www.hollandlakefuture.com](http://www.hollandlakefuture.com) updated with information as it receives feedback from the community. She also said they aren't finished talking with people who live in the area and have met with and have good lines of communication open with Tester, U.S. Sen. Steve Daines, R-Montana and Rep. Matt Rosendale, R-Montana.

"In addition, we're meeting with local leaders and organizations who care deeply about the future of the Lodge — the conversations have been informative and constructive," Hutchinson said in an email. "We will continue to meet with and engage the community."

The Daily Montanan is a nonprofit newsroom. To read the article as originally published, [click here](#).

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