

Statement by the Niagara Escarpment Foundation to the Council of the Municipality of Grey Highlands on finalizing the sale of the municipal Talisman lands in the Beaver Valley to Westway Capital Inc.

This statement was prepared for presentation on Feb. 2/22 at the Grey Highlands Council meeting on a draft bylaw to finalize the sale of the two municipally owned parcels at the Talisman lands to Westway.

February 2, 2022

Mayor McQueen and Members of Council: My name is Linda Pim and I am here representing the Niagara Escarpment Foundation. We are an all-volunteer non-profit and registered charity involved in research and education on the protection of the Niagara Escarpment from Tobermory to Niagara. We gave you a submission on the Talisman lands in May 2021 and on the conditional sale of the municipal Talisman lands in July 2021.

With a draft bylaw for the land sale to Westway Capital Inc. now before you, it appears, shockingly, that since the announcement of the conditional sale, nothing has changed in the way Grey Highlands approaches community engagement on the future of the Talisman lands. Since the court application by Protect Talisman Lands Association evidently has not caused Council to take the needed opportunity to reflect on how you honour the public trust, we wonder what will.

Just as concerning, the higher-value offer to purchase the lands by the Escarpment Biosphere Conservancy, which would protect the lands for public benefit in their natural state as much as possible, has been tossed aside, an action that our Foundation finds unconscionable. To sell off a precious natural asset to private development interests, when all governments should be retaining their natural heritage lands as a legacy for the future, is breathtakingly short-sighted.

The Niagara Escarpment Foundation fully supports Protect Talisman Lands Association in the work it is doing and the positions it is taking to serve the public interest in the Talisman lands.

If Grey Highlands finalizes the sale of the municipal Talisman lands to Westway, make no mistake: this action would become known far and wide, and in a very negative light, in communities up and down the Niagara Escarpment. Grey Highlands would soon become a pariah when it comes to Niagara Escarpment protection for future generations.

As we stated in our submission last May, if the public lands at Talisman are sold to maximize development and profits, this would constitute an unprecedented rupture of the historic tradition of private-public partnerships faithfully supporting the Niagara Escarpment Plan in the Beaver Valley. There has been a half-century legacy of environmental protection for the Escarpment in the Beaver Valley. We must keep the municipal lands in public ownership to help meet the enormous public demand for publicly accessible rural protected areas for low-impact outdoor recreation. Such recreation can mean significant economic opportunities.

We call upon Grey Highlands Council to reject the draft bylaw that would finalize the sale of the Upper and Lower Talisman lands to Westway Capital. You have a historic opportunity to better protect a UNESCO Biosphere and Ontario's Greenbelt by keeping the municipal lands in public hands or selling them to a conservation-first, public-interest land trust – the EBC.

Thank you.