

Topnotch expansion faces challenge

By Nathan Burgess | Posted: Thursday, June 7, 2012 2:00 pm

Two owners of luxury condominiums at Topnotch Resort and Spa are questioning the town government's approval of a major hotel expansion there.

The 60,000-square-foot project would include a new south wing with 50 rooms, a lounge-café and conference room, and a larger parking lot. It would also include a geothermal heating and cooling setup. Construction would start this fall.

The Stowe Development Review Board gave the project the go-ahead in April.

Leonard and Karin Gorski, who own two condos at Topnotch, have appealed that decision to the Vermont Environmental Court.

The Gorskis run a Montreal-based fashion company called Furs by Leonard Gorski Inc. Its website describes the company as “a leading North American manufacturer and distributor of luxury outerwear, furs and lux accessories.”

Leonard Gorski blasted the Topnotch project at a public hearing in April, likening the design to a Hampton Inn and worrying that it would worsen parking problems there.

“The parking lots as they exist now barely support even off-peak times of need at the spa,” he said.

Town officials approved the project April 10. On April 30, the Gorskis appealed it to the environmental court, which has the power to overturn the decision.

The Gorskis claim the town made a number of errors when approving the project, including:

- Finding no adverse impact on traffic and parking.
- Granting a waiver to build fewer parking spaces than required in town zoning laws. Rich Baker, Stowe's zoning administrator, said the resort got out of the parking requirement because it includes both a restaurant and hotel and qualifies as a multi-use property. Under Stowe's zoning laws, it can do that, he said.
- Finding the project will not affect the character of the area. Gorski and development review board member Peter Collotta argued the new hotel would be overly visible from Mountain Road. Collotta was the only board member to vote against approval.
- Allowing a 49.6-foot-tall building where 35 feet is the maximum height. Town officials gave Topnotch more height than normally allowed, because the hotel could cut the width of the building and still fit in the rooms.

The Gorskis also question whether Topnotch misled town officials in presenting the project.

Baker said the town government typically lets its decisions speak for themselves; it's up to the landowner — in this case, Topnotch — to choose whether to speak out.

Jesse Goldfine of Stowe-based Barr and Associates, which is representing Topnotch in the case, called the appeal “baseless” and said he is confident the town's approval will stick.

“The (development review board) properly granted our client a permit for the project, which will enhance the property and create new jobs,” he said in a statement.

Long process

Topnotch, one of four major resorts in Stowe — along with Stowe Mountain Lodge, Stoweflake Mountain Resort and Spa, and Trapp Family Lodge — has eyed expansion plans for many years.

In 2006, the former owners of Topnotch, the Cummings family, had planned a \$60 million hotel, restaurant and spa expansion. But the collapse of the U.S. economy in 2008 and competition from the newly built Stowe Mountain Lodge forced the Cummingses to give up ownership of the resort in 2010.

The resort is now owned by a subsidiary of Wyoming-based MetWest Terra Hospitality, which has proposed a scaled-back expansion — 50 rooms instead of 78.

The Gorskis' appeal could take months or even years, said Baker, the zoning administrator, but he expects it to be resolved this year.

“It's a little bit early to say,” he said.