

Maligne Tours Information Session

Jane Ross and David Wasserman of the AHA Board, as well as some members-at-large, attended Maligne Tours' information night on Tuesday 26 November held at Fort Edmonton Park in Edmonton to learn more about Maligne Tours' conceptual proposal for a major development at the north end of Maligne Lake. Although the AHA hoped to take photos of the session to share, the fireplace that had been lit to provide some heat in the Clerk's Quarters smoked very badly, making it impossible to get decent photographs.

There were about 50 people in attendance who were concerned about the proposed resort at Maligne Lake. As well, there were the staff of Maligne Tours including General Manager Pat Crowley who fielded many of the questions, a Parks Canada representative, and Brad Kennedy, a principal of Brinsmead Kennedy Architecture of Edmonton. The architectural firm has been hired by Maligne Tours to work on the project.

Maligne Tours has noticed over the past few years that its business has deteriorated, especially the numbers of people taking the Spirit Island cruises. In an effort to revive the numbers of people visiting the lake and partaking of other services offered by them, Maligne Tours has developed a conceptual proposal that would see the current development at the north end of Maligne Lake expanded to include: 15 tent cabins on the site of the original pods below the historic Maligne Lake Chalet, with an adjacent wash house. This would occur off lease; a 66-room 5-star overnight accommodation and day lodge building(s) that would replace the current day use lodge. This accommodation would occur on-lease; and a wildlife-themed admission entry Discovery Maze aimed at children, approximately one acre in size. To enhance the overnight and day use experience, Maligne Tours is proposing a number of historic interpretative opportunities that would have no footprint of their own but would be incorporated into the visitor experience through storytelling and new thematic interpretive programmes. Other educational experiences would be offered, presumably for payment, through the company's proposed earth-caching programmes that would take place along existing hiking trails and voyageur canoe excursions with storytelling. Other interpretative offerings would include a Mary Shaffer photo exhibit and one on the history of the park's wardens. The current day lodge is deemed to be inadequate and out-of-date and would be replaced by the five-star accommodation building.

Maligne Tours gave a short presentation on the above and then proposed that the audience split up and wander about several nodes where staff was present to answer any questions. That idea was quickly rejected by those in attendance, and the rest of the evening was given over to Q & As directed at Crowley and Kennedy. There was much criticism of the proposal, many pointing out that the beauty of Maligne Lake did not need to be "enhanced" through more infrastructure, especially since Parks Canada's visitor surveys show that 99 percent of visitors to Maligne Lake were satisfied with their visitor experience. Many worried aloud that development at the lake would be evidence of development "creep" that is threatening all of our national parks, and if the Maligne Tours Ltd. proposal is approved, it would be precedent setting, opening the door to other business expansion.

There was also sharp criticism of the proposed five-star overnight accommodation. Maligne Tours' lease, which does not expire until 2042, allows for a seasonal operation only, shutting down over the winter months. This would not change, but 66 hotel rooms over a six month operating summer season could translate into up to 24,000 person nights. The question was raised how 24,000 people could not have a negative impact on the wildlife in the area. Also, Maligne Tours is proposing an upscale hotel that would exclude all but wealthy clients, effectively shutting out middle-class visitors.

An Environmental Impact Assessment will have to be done before Parks Canada makes a ruling on the proposal. Responsibility for the impact assessment lies with Maligne Tours, and the question was raised how impartial such a report could be. A suggestion was made that the impact assessment be subject to third party scrutiny and review.

Despite the many criticisms of the proposals, it should be noted that over the past number of years, Maligne Tours has undertaken a number of commendable initiatives including the restoration of the historically designated 1927 Maligne Lake Chalet and the Curly Phillips Boat House, and the restoration of the cruise boat "Leah".

Maligne Tours made Comment Cards available for those who wished to mail their observations on the proposal. Written comments should be mailed to Maligne Tours, P.O. Box 280, Jasper, AB, T0E 1E0. Others are invited to email their comments to Malign Tours at: <mailto:comments@malignelake.com>.