



Tamarack amenities cited for luring president

Resort officials did not know they were being considered until White House called

BY BEN SALMON

The Star-News

Planning for President George W. Bush's visit to Tamarack Resort near Donnelly this week started last winter, according to Brian Whitlock, chief of staff for Gov. Dirk Kempthorne.

"The governor was at the White House in February for an event with the president when the president pulled him aside and said, 'I'm coming to Idaho,'" Whitlock said on Friday.

That got the ball rolling on a massive planning effort that culminated in Bush's 48-hour stay at the new ski-and-golf resort on the western shore of Lake Cascade on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday.

Tamarack has miles of bike trails and access to fishing on Lake Cascade, and those kinds of amenities are what Bush was looking for when choosing the site of his vacation, Whitlock said.

"He told the governor, 'I want to see the beautiful parts of your state and all Idaho has to offer,'" Whitlock said. "They talked specifically about mountain biking and many outdoor recreation opportunities we have here in Idaho."

Kempthorne - who had "never missed an opportunity to invite the president to Idaho" - was "really excited" about Bush's visit, as was the president himself, Whitlock said.

Over the next few months, Kempthorne

and his staffers had several conversations with Bush and White House officials in an effort to answer "the question of where to enjoy Idaho's beautiful scenery and outdoors," Whitlock said.

By late spring, Kempthorne's office had drafted a "menu" of possible vacation destinations for Bush's consideration, Whitlock said.

That list had about five choices, including Sun Valley, Coeur d'Alene, the Sawtooth National Recreational Area, and Tamarack Resort, he said.

That's when the White House went to work on its selection process. White House spokesman Allen Abney declined to discuss the details of choosing a site, but said the president "enjoys hiking and biking" and that Kempthorne was "instrumental" in getting Bush to Idaho.

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Visit

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On Wednesday, Tamarack CEO in-Pierre Boespflug said he believes there were two major factors in Bush's decision to visit the resort - the 25 miles of bike trails and the fact that the president would enjoy a variety of amenities within walking distance.

"I think the fact that we offer the park, fine dining, golf and lake access in close proximity to each other was a real positive for the White House selection committee," Boespflug said. "That way you can do everything they want to without having to move the

president around with security." About two months ago, selection committee members started visiting Tamarack under assumed names so that resort staff did not know who they were serving, Boespflug said. The Tamarack staff's friendliness and quality of service may also have been a factor in the decision to come to the resort, he said.

Finally, about one month ago, White House officials simply called Tamarack's main reservation line to talk to resort officials about a visit, said Scott Turlington, a former Kempthorne aide who is now Tamarack's director of external affairs.

"We literally picked up the phone and it was the White

House," Turlington said. "They spoke with (Director of Guest Relations) Margo Flaherty and talked to her about what they were thinking about doing and whether we could accommodate that."

'Full speed ahead'

Turlington, Flaherty and Vice President of Operations Jim Spentst immediately went "full-speed ahead" on planning for the visit, Turlington said.

They worked to answer the questions and concerns of White House officials related to security, lodging and whether the site was ready for a high-profile visitor.

"They asked if we were a resort or a construction site, and we're a little of both," Turlington

said. "But we were able to schedule things with construction so their needs were met."

Soon after the initial phone call, a Secret Service agent spent three days in the area, checking out the resort, its bike trails, and its surroundings. Days later, the White House called again and told Tamarack to get ready for its most famous visitor so far.

"When they were in town looking things over we made our best sales pitch," Turlington said. "Whatever they needed or wanted, we committed to meeting those needs."

Turlington noted that Tamarack did not push to get on Kempthorne's list of possible destinations for Bush and was

unaware that it was on such a list until the first call came from the White House.

Once the visit was probable, resort staff went to work on preparations. They made room for a support staff of more than 100 people without canceling existing reservations, Turlington said.

Sod, flowers planted

Much of the work on the ground was to "spruce things up" and finish projects that hadn't gotten done, Spentst said. Many areas were landscaped with sod and flowers and every Tamarack staffer began cleaning cabins and townhouses that would be used by Bush's team, Spentst said.

The resort's security team went to work setting checkpoints and making sure everything was as the Secret Service requested.

Chef Gary Kucy started preparations for food and beverage service. And construction was shut down, idling about 400 workers, Spentst said.

All the hard work was well worth the effort, Boespflug said on Wednesday, about an hour after Bush thanked the resort on live television in Nampa.

"It was an honor for us to accommodate (Bush), and this kind of thing is worth a year of marketing dollars for Tamarack, Valley County, and the whole area," Boespflug said. "It's a real shot in the arm."