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What Have We Got to Lose? Tusayan and Grand Canyon Airport Proposed Developments

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The Town of Tusayan hopes to build a massive luxury commercial development outside the South Rim entrance gate, at the same time the State of Arizona is planning a series of upgrades to its Grand Canyon National Park Airport. Together, the two actions could cause a huge influx of multiday visitors to Grand Canyon National Park. The developments would bottleneck traffic, consume vast amounts of water, change wildlife dispersal patterns, stress park resources, light up the night sky, and demand increased social services. The Town's commercial development proposal has faced setbacks since the beginning, but developers and the Town continue to push it forward.

Background:

On Election Day 2000, Coconino County voted 2-1 against a major development proposal on Grand Canyon's southern doorstep. Three years later, the Arizona State Legislature changed state law to allow towns within 10 miles of national parks and monuments to incorporate with just 500 residents. In 2010, the number of Tusayan voters temporarily increased by 43% and the Town voted to incorporate.

The alleged scandals didn't end there. Several of the Town's first Council members were accused of taking money and free travel from Gruppo Stilo, the Italian development group behind the proposed development. The Town Council remains stacked with employees of Stilo's partner, Washington state resident Elling Halvorson, whose family owns and runs Papillon Helicopters.

Tusayan has a legitimate housing shortage, but rather than creating non-employer owned housing units, the Town has instead pushed hard to enable a massive commercial project, only offering a small number of temporarily located manufactured homes in the years since incorporation. The Town is now planning for a limited number of permanent homes on its TenX land parcel, but the number of homes it can build is limited under a contract it signed with Stilo.

The Town has an extremely limited water supply, no landfill, and no medical services or police force. A large commercial development would create a number of problems for the park, the surrounding National Forest, and tribal interests. Traffic congestion, lighting, noise, trash, crime, and wildlife impacts could all be expected, along with an influx of new multi-day visitors using the already overtaxed infrastructure of the South Rim.

In 2016, after receiving over 120,000 letters of opposition, the Kaibab National Forest refused to grant rights-of-way for roads and utilities that would have enabled 3 million square feet of commercial space, 2,100 homes, an undisclosed number of RV spaces and hotel rooms, plus a dude ranch and spa on parcels adjacent to the tiny town. Upon rejecting the Town's application, Kaibab National Forest Supervisor Heather Provencio said the development "is deeply controversial, is opposed by local and national communities, would stress local and Park infrastructure, and have untold impacts to the surrounding Tribal and National Park lands," and refused to reconsider unless the Town worked with these important neighbors to find a proposal that everyone could agree on. The Town then signed a contract with the developer agreeing to litigate against the Forest Service for denying their application, further proving that Stilo's interests are at the forefront of the Town Council's priorities.

Just last year, claiming that the Town was forced to expand upward if Stilo couldn't build out across the landscape, the Town attempted to lift building heights up to 65 feet, from a limit of 35-to-40 feet. The item was opposed and brought to a voter initiative. LoganLuca, a business partnership between Stilo and Elling Halverson, outspent local opposition by more than 2-to-1, but still lost the election by 11 votes.

Tusayan still hasn't revealed their potential water supply, but associated corporations have purchased a retired coal slurry pipeline that might enable water to be brought in from the already over allocated and drought stricken Colorado River.

Meanwhile, the Arizona Department of Transportation, who owns the Grand Canyon National Park Airport, has been planning to expand the airport's runway, replace the terminal, and dig a new well on the property. Last year, they added runway lighting that is clearly visible from the North Rim. They are trying to solicit regularly scheduled commercial service to Tusayan. If the airport upgrades move forward **and** thousands of rooms of new residential and hotel capacity are added to Tusayan, the collective impact on Grand Canyon could be enormous.

Sierra Club and collaborators have been fighting the development at every step, and we hope the river guiding community will help us stay alert and speak loudly against a massive Tusayan expansion!