

CAIRNGORMS NATIONAL PARK AUTHORITY FINANCE COMMITTEE

FOR DECISION

Title: LAGGAN FOREST INITIATIVE – BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT STAFF

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Purpose

To confirm continuation funding for the Laggan Forest Initiative for years 2011/2012 and 2012/2013 (two and three of the project)

Recommendations

That the Committee formally approve commitment of £10,200 per year for the next two years for phase one of the Laggan Forest Initiative Project. Year one has already been funded from core CNPA budgets (£9,600).to stimulate partner match funding.

Executive Summary

1. The Laggan Forest Initiative is a multi faceted development that seeks to promote health and well-being, regenerate the local economy, and invigorate community spirit. It also seeks, through the project to develop recently acquired community assets. (Forest Land) and community ownership and management of a market leading recreation destination in the Cairngorms National Parks, Wolftrax Mountain Biking Centre.
2. The project is the means by which the Laggan Forest Trust (LFT) can begin to realise a wider vision which includes:
 - a) Owning and managing Strathmashie forest,
 - b) Providing renewable energy for the community
 - c) Building a Forest Centre Hub
 - d) Housing Social Enterprises
 - e) Producing local food
 - f) Developing existing tourism and recreation facilities.
3. In phase one of this much wider long term development, the funding package will support: a community woodfuel business and micro-renewables demonstration site; walks, footpaths, pony trails, outdoor classroom and community woodland; and a sustainably designed forest centre, constructed using local wood. This centre will provide a base for the LFT's activities, including public service delivery, conference space and educational facilities as well providing space to rent for the Wolftrax mountain biking operation and other community-based enterprises.

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Background

1. The Laggan Forest Trust was established in 1998, following negotiation with the Forestry Commission to forge a partnership with which to jointly manage Strathmashie Forest. This partnership was the first of its kind in Scotland and is now represented by a twenty-five year partnership agreement, signed with Scottish Ministers in 2004. Following a period of community consultation, in 2007 the LFT purchased three separate areas of land in Strathmashie Forest through the National Forest Land Scheme. This project is the means by which these areas of land can be developed by the Laggan Community.

Recent Activity

2. During 2010 LFT has consolidated its position by refreshing its relationships with key partners including Forestry Commission Scotland, CNPA, The Highland Council, HIE, Scottish and Scottish Southern Energy, reviewing its over arching vision and restructuring its governance and operations. It has employed a temporary development manager to drive the above activity and worked to secure a funding package for phase one of development (see annex I EJJ for full details and background to the project)

Evidence of Need

3. The evidence of need for this project has been highlighted in several consultations and research projects:
 - a) The Our Community a Way Forward (resulting in the Laggan Community Action Plan) Oct 2009
 - b) Laggan Forest Trust Business development seminar Dec 2009
 - c) LFT economic appraisal 2010
 - d) Scottish Index of Multiple Deprivation 2009
 - e) CNPA Economic Base Line Report 2010

Consequences of not funding the Laggan Forest Trust Initiative

4. With respect to the whole development it is key that the CNPA support this project. The temporary planning consent that exists for the current LFT and Wolfrax trailhead buildings at Strathmashie Forest expires in 2012. As well as the detrimental impact on the number of visitors (particularly mountain bike visitors) to the site and associated expenditure and employment impacts that removal of the facilities would have, the future of the Trust would be in jeopardy.
5. The Wolfrax Centre now renown throughout Scotland has become an important Western gateway to the Park, providing top quality facilities for mountain bikers and their families, attracting over 30,000 visitors each year.
6. Lack of funding support will result in the loss of an increasingly successful local business and severely impact on other existing (fragile) local businesses. In addition, if the community do not take forward any development of the site, Forestry Commission Scotland has reserved the right to buy back the land. Without this

development project, levels of local employment are unlikely to increase. Without employment, it will be difficult to maintain the level of population required to sustain local services, which in turn, will impact on the perceived quality of life on offer that makes Laggan an attractive place for new families to settle.

Recommendation

- 7. That the Committee formally approve commitment of £10,200 per year for the next two years for phase one of the Laggan Forest Initiative Project**

Next Steps

8. This funding will cover phase one of the project outlined in the executive summary and in more detail in annex one. It is envisaged that the project will be largely self sustaining at the end of the three years. Generating income through the management of the entire forest including the operation of the Forest Centre, Mountain Biking facility and Wood Fuel Business. It is important to note that this project looks to employ approximately 16 additional people.

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