

# A 4,000 Square-Foot Crapper?

## Update From Save the Confluence Coalition

TEN-THOUSAND TRAM-RIDERS a day will need a hefty honey bucket to handle their crap. In addition to a 4,000 square-foot “restroom facility,” Grand Canyon Escalade promoters plan to build food and beverage, retail, and other structures at the bottom of Grand Canyon, just upriver from the Colorado’s confluence with the Little Colorado River.

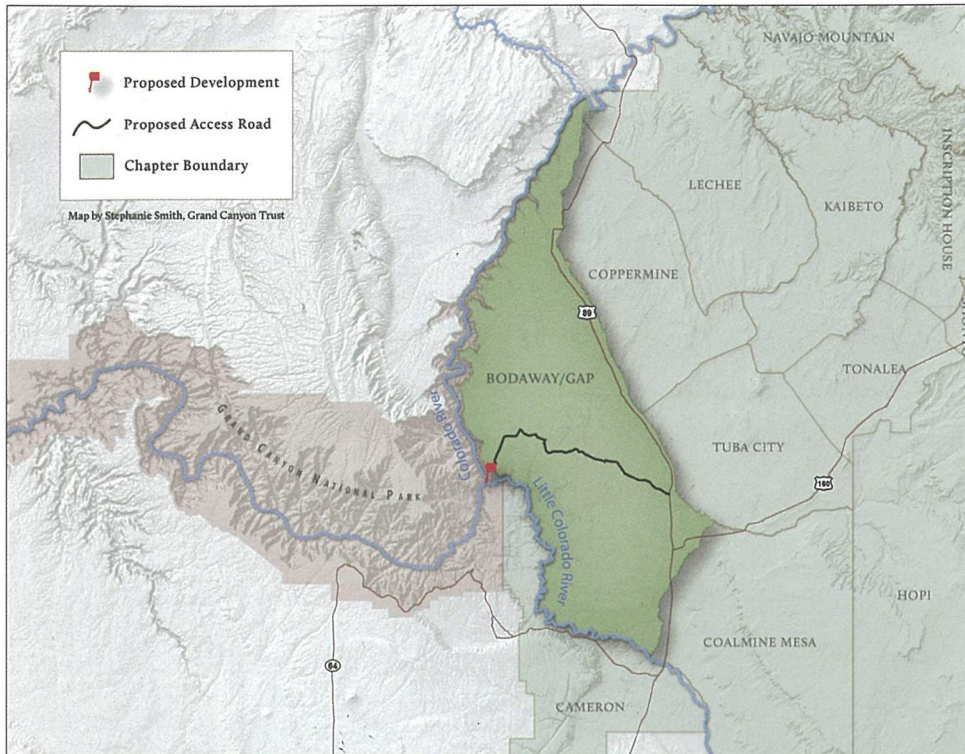
anyone’s guess where it will go from there.

Other issues are pooping on the profiteers’ parade. Navajo citizens are taking issue with Whitmer’s empty promises. Escalade ads say it will bring a “brighter future” to western Navajo communities, but details of their plan suggest something darker.

In late November, the *Navajo Times* reported:

“The “Grand Canyon Escalade project is all but guaranteed, according to President Ben Shelly’s special advisor Deswood Tome.” To bolster his claim, Tome gave the reporter a copy of the secretly negotiated agreement between developers and President Shelly’s office as well as a copy of legislation that the Navajo Nation Council would need to approve before the project can proceed.

Tome said that outgoing Council Delegate Duane Tsiniginie, who represented the Bodaway-Gap



A recent brochure from Lamar Whitmer and his “Confluence Partners” promises big profits from “new visitor market growth potential for an innovative, safe, affordable, once-in-a-lifetime excursion.” Like Skywalk, it says that Escalade will offer underserved consumers “the unique ability to view the canyon from the rim.” But unlike its competitor, visitors will get a view from “the river’s edge on the Canyon floor without hiking for hours or the trouble of riding a mule, or buying an expensive river rafting trip.”

Escalade’s proposed “master agreement” with the Navajo Nation (which was only recently made public) does not include any sewage treatment facilities—either down by the river or up top, where another 60,000-plus square-foot of commercial space would be built. Perhaps deadheading gondolas will ferry compactor bags of human waste out of the canyon. It’s

Chapter where Escalade is proposed, would introduce the bill to approve Escalade in December. But Tsiniginie balked, and his replacement was sworn in on January 13. Tuchoney Slim, the new representative, is supportive of Save the Confluence family members’ campaign to “stop the land grab.” To date, no sponsor has stepped forward to introduce the legislation, especially since terms of the agreement were leaked.

The agreement requires the Navajo Nation to pay at least \$65 million to bring water, electricity, and a paved road to the proposed Escalade site. A “covenant not to compete” prohibits local jewelry vendors and other businesses from setting up shop on more than 50,000 acres along Highway 89 and the access road to Escalade. Local residents and grazing permit holders were never consulted, nor have they granted permission for the 420 acres in question to be used





for commercial development or for many miles of right-of-way. Failure to allow prior review by the Navajo Nation Historic Preservation Office and other appropriate agencies appear to be sticking points. These may be preventing the bill from being officially released for public review and consideration by the council.

In return for enacting the developer-written legislation, the Navajo Nation would receive a maximum of eighteen percent of gross revenues if attendance exceeds two million, a figure that would drop to eight percent if visitation falls below 800,000. Such uncertainty must be as concerning to investors as it is to Navajo legislators. No revenues would be returned for decades if the Navajo Nation fails to build and maintain supporting infrastructure and investors are required to pay for water, power, and roads. The Bodaway-Gap Chapter and other local governments would be prohibited from taxing any earnings, nor would affected communities be guaranteed any direct benefits. These exclusions fly in the face of a resolution by Bodaway-Gap requiring that 25 percent of all revenues to be returned to the Chapter.

While approval of Escalade is stalled within the Navajo legislative process, the Save the Confluence coalition is building a strong defense in case such approval was ever secured. More than thirty grazing permit holders are prepared to file an injunction against a vote to approve the land withdrawal for failing to obtain their approval, as required by Navajo law. Hopi leaders, who voted unanimously against Escalade when it was first proposed, stand ready to ensure that the Inter-Tribal Compact—sanctioned under a federal consent decree that lifted the Bennett Freeze—is enforced. The compact requires Hopi and Navajo approval of any development within mapped areas of cultural significance. Escalade's proposed location is clearly within a delineated cultural area where prior approval by Hopi is mandated.

Despite reassuring signs of Escalade's demise, Lamar Whitmer has doubled down on efforts to keep his champion Ben Shelly in as "interim President," while last-year's botched election is being rescheduled. Meanwhile, thirteen new delegates have taken positions within the 24-member council. Whitmer has reportedly hired at least one outgoing council member to

help keep his scheme alive. He and his partners are again working every eddy and back channel to finagle Escalade's approval by the new council.

Escalade's business plan is a crap shoot: the lure of lucre blinds us to devastating losses. Like carnival barkers, they promise big benefits but demand tribute to pay for infrastructure. They divide families. They make maddening claims—that Escalade protects nearby sacred areas and prayer sites; that the tramway will open access to a place where only the elite are now allowed to play. They disenfranchise local residents, discount harms to Grand Canyon National Park, and discredit Hopi, Navajo, Zuni, and other native claims to cultural patrimony of place. But effective opposition by Save the Confluence families is taking a bite out of their bark.

Hubris has a long history of failure in our region. Nonetheless, profiteers are still pecking away at Grand Canyon's sacred places. Once lost, wilderness and spiritual spaces cannot be replaced. Thanks for your ongoing interest and support.

*Roger Clark*