

## Would you like to Super-Size that?

### Controversial B.C. resort proposal holds promise of world-class snow

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Fifty-five kilometres west of Invermere, B.C., beyond the pavement's end, lies a potential snowriders' paradise.

Known to most by the remarkably appropriate name of Jumbo, this hidden treasure shares its name with the proposed Jumbo Glacier Resort.

The name is appropriate because Jumbo would provide lift access to an astounding 1,700-metre, or nearly 5,600-foot, vertical drop -- the longest in North America -- amid some of the most coveted and consistent powder snow on the planet.

However, along with the skiing potential, Jumbo's name aptly describes the substantial local controversy and opposition that swirls around the \$250 million, 5,900-hectare resort project, which has been in various stages of conceptualization, planning and proposal for nearly two decades.

The Jumbo proposal is reaching a head just as B.C.'s regulatory and policy approach, led by Premier Gordon

Campbell, is tilting decidedly in favour of development projects, particularly resort developments, as job-creating engines of economic expansion.

Set in the heart of the Purcell Mountains, Jumbo has a reputation for having some of the best snow conditions in the world, drawing helicopter and backcountry skiers from around the globe.

Those conditions, which include up to 700 metres of summertime glacier skiing on the Jumbo, Farnham and Commander glaciers, have drawn the attention of the Canadian ski team, which practiced there earlier this year.

It is unique in North America, says Oberto Oberti, the Italian-born Vancouver architect who first envisioned the project in 1984.

He discovered the valley while searching the continent for a site appropriate for a

European-style, high-alpine resort, with adequate vertical, exceptional snow conditions and proximity to transportation links along with the appropriate latitude, scenery, climate and altitude.

"When I looked at the geography I discovered there was only one mountain I thought would be suitable, because it had an existing forestry road going to it. The others were in parks, and couldn't be touched," Oberto recalls.



**The Jumbo Valley in the Purcell range of the Rockies looms in the distance as an unidentified member of the Canadian Ski Team practises on the Farnham Glacier in July 2003.**

**CREDIT: Oberto Oberti**



**(Snow West: a comprehensive guide for snowriders in western Canada)**

Oberto's description of the project's remarkable attributes -- which would include the highest altitude lift stations in Canada -- would leave any serious skier or snowboarder drooling.

The vertical drop will be the longest in North America, and I still believe we can claim that some of the ski runs, particularly the one on Commander Glacier, will be the most fabulous ski run in the world, because of elevation, climate and latitude," he says.

Later this month, Oberti -- who helped plan and design Golden, B.C.'s, Kicking Horse Mountain Resort - will deliver to the B.C. government Jumbo's Final Project Report and

Conceptual Master Plan, the latest step in an on-again, off-again formal process that began in 1991.

The report set in motion a review and public consultation process, but if that hurdle is passed, ultimately the decision whether the resort goes ahead will lie with three B.C. cabinet ministers. They are Minister of Sustainable Resources Management Stan Hagen; Minister of Water, Land and Air Protection Joyce Murray and Minister of Competition, Science and Enterprise Rick Thorpe.

"I would guess that if (Oberti) files the information and it's accepted, the ministers' decision would occur between August and the middle of September," says Martin Glassman, the Jumbo project assessment director for B.C.'s Environmental Assessment Office. "It's an extensive process."

While acknowledging wide local opposition to the project, Glassman emphasizes there are supporters as well.

The project is divisive. It's fairly safe to say that a lot of people who see benefits are the ones who look at the economic side of it outweighing any environmental or social risk impact," Glassman notes.

Those people often tend to be business people, and you're put in a very difficult position in terms of publicly expressing your support because your business might end up being penalized."

The review will come on the heels of the establishment of B.C.'s Resorts Task Force, led by Minister of State for Deregulation Kevin Falcon, who has also just introduced Bill 75, the Significant Projects Streamlining Act.

Both grew out of Premier Campbell's 2003 Throne Speech challenge to the province's tourism industry to double its \$9 billion annual revenue over the next ten years.

"If there are roadblocks or barriers to the project going forward that are unreasonable in nature, then we have the ability under this legislation to remove those barriers and ensure that a project that provides strong economic benefits for the population of B.C. moves forward," said Falcon.

"We recognize that resorts, in British Columbia especially, are huge economic generators," Falcon adds.

Thorpe, who is responsible for tourism in B.C., is even more blunt.

"We look at all project opportunities with a positive light. In British Columbia, there has been a change," says Thorpe.

Oberti's project documents will also prompt the latest and likely the strongest battle yet against the project in an acrimonious, 13-year campaign, promise opponents such as the 400-member, Invermere-based Jumbo Creek Conservation Society.

This is something that has galvanized our community like nothing else before, it's really quite remarkable. If it comes to bodies on the road, that's what it's going to come to," says JCCS president Jacqueline Pinsonneault, who argues against Oberti's development plans on extensive economic, environmental and societal grounds.

"Jumbo is merely scenery for him and it's much, much more for us," she adds, wistfully acknowledging the change of approach on resort projects emanating from the provincial capital in Victoria.

The government is trying to facilitate this project in any way possible.

Environmental and wildlife concerns, along with a tenure issue with affiliate R.K. Heli-Ski Panorama Inc., along with are nagging questions for Panorama Mountain Village general manager Gord Ahrens, who believes if those conflicts can be resolved, Jumbo makes a lot of sense.

If those two things can be satisfied, it's a beautiful area up there and will make a very attractive ski experience or vacation experience," said Ahrens.

I believe critical mass does help all of us grow," he added, noting recent expansions at his own resort along with growth at nearby Fernie, Kimberley and the opening of Kicking Horse three years ago.

We're now becoming this western Canada ski destination and this can only go to help that. When you're marketing internationally, that adds momentum."

If things unfold as Oberti and his U.S., Canadian, Italian and Japanese financial backers hope, construction of the first lifts could begin as early as the spring of 2005. Over at least 12 years a village of up to 6,250 beds, including 5,500 tourist and 750 staff beds would emerge on the site of a former lumber mill.

The facilities would include hotels, condominiums and private residences and lift facilities would include a gondola, chairlifts and glacier T-Bars, the latter unprecedented in Canada but commonplace in Europe.

Although opponents to development have rallied around the phrase "Jumbo Wild," much of the area has been logged and the valley, already scarred by clear cuts and logging roads was considered as a route for the Trans-Canada Highway in the 1950s. It draws thousands of hikers, campers, skiers, snowmobilers and snowboarders each year. Pinsonneault doesn't believe that's sufficient rationale to create what she describes as an exclusive playground for the rich that would shut out other users while further endangering the environment.

For his part, Oberti believes that given its unparalleled physical qualities, the Jumbo project has a manifest destiny. It is a project that is almost inevitable. That is why it kept coming back.

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