

Investors wait since 1991 on ski resort plan Regulatory faceoff

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VANCOUVER - If there is such a thing as the perfect ski hill, Oberto Oberti believes he has found it. Jumbo Glacier, perched high in the Purcell Mountains not far from the British Columbia resort town of Invermere, is a wilderness of spectacular views, seemingly endless slopes and, best of all, a climate that allows for generous snowfalls of powder even in midsummer.

"It is the best skiing in North America," said Mr. Oberti.

His dream is to build a \$450-million resort there, a skiers' paradise that would rival the top ski hills of Europe. The Vancouver architect has been doggedly pursuing that dream for more than 13 years.

The main barrier is not money -- he says the financing is already in place -- but opposition from a handful of environmental and local residents groups.

They have turned his proposal into a cause celebre, accusing Mr. Oberti and his supporters of everything from threatening grizzly bear migration routes to hurting the local economy by competing with other, nearby ski resorts.

"There has been so much misinformation," said Mr. Oberti, who says he is too frustrated to discuss the criticism leveled against him in any detail. Mr. Oberti is no stranger to the ski hill business. He helped design Kicking Horse Mountain Resort near Golden, B.C. as well as parts of Whistler village north of Vancouver, one of the most successful ski areas in North America.

The plan for Jumbo Glacier was born back in the late '80s when he was approached by a group of Japanese investors who asked him to scope out a site for a high-altitude resort, one that could offer four-season skiing like some of the famous European alpine hot spots.

"If you study a map of North America, you come to conclusion that the Purcell Mountains are the ideal location because of the climate and the scenery," he said.

The views from Jumbo Glacier are indeed breathtaking and the quality of the snow, especially in the high country, is regarded by many local ski enthusiasts as very good, perhaps even the best in the world. Another key selling point is the 1,700-metre vertical drop of the slope at Jumbo Glacier, the biggest of any ski hill in North America.

The project, designed to be built in three stages, would including hotels and residential development with a total of about 6,000 beds-- by industry standards a boutique resort, with about one-tenth the number of beds of Whistler. But it would still compete with the top resorts of North America. "This is a unique mountain... There's no other location that compares," he declared.

Environmental groups see things differently. Building what amounts to a village on Jumbo Glacier would endanger "an ecological treasure," said Meredith Hamstead, a spokeswoman for Jumbo Creek Conservation Society. "There are species issues and habitat issues."

According to Ms. Hamstead, the proposed site of the resort in the path of a trail used by grizzly bears and a habitat for other species as well.

"We are quite concerned," agreed Vicky Husband, conservation chair of the Sierra Club of Canada for British Columbia. "You go up into a new valley, you have to look at the actual wildlife issues. The animals have a hard time already."

But the truth is that the area has already seen significant development including several mines. "There has been mining activity in the past," conceded Ms. Hamstead. There is a lot of logging and indeed part of the resort would be built on the site of an old sawmill.

As for the bears, according to Mr. Oberti, there is no hard evidence to show there is anything environmentally unique about the area. "The project as proposed could not interfere with a migration route, even if there were one."

And Jumbo Glacier is already a busy heli-skiing destination.

But despite evidence showing the resort would not hurt the area, Mr. Oberti discovered the government was reluctant even to consider giving him a permit to build it.

He started the application process back in 1991. Countless reports and environmental reviews later he is still waiting for a decision. "There have been a lot of steps," he said.

So many in fact that the Japanese investors decided after several years that they had had enough. Their place was taken by a new group who, perhaps because of the controversy around the project, have opted to remain anonymous. Mr. Oberti declined to say how much he and his backers have invested in the project, but its likely a lot of money.

But now at last there is reason to believe the long wait may be coming to an end, not just for Mr. Oberti, but for numerous other would-be resort owners.

In his throne speech last February B.C. Premier Gordon Campbell said he wanted the tourism industry to double in size over the next decade. He also said he wanted to see a network of four season resorts across the province. Since then his government has made several key legislative changes aimed at helping that process along, including limiting the amount of time ministries can spend mulling over permit applications for resorts.

"What we're trying to do is recognize what huge economic generators resorts can be, especially in rural communities," said Kevin Falcon, Minister of State for Deregulation and chair of a recently formed provincial task force on resorts.

Critics accuse the government of abandoning environment standards and allowing developers unfettered access to wilderness areas. And while it appears likely that the resort industry will get a boost, Mr. Falcon denies the government is dropping the ball on the environment. He said the main purpose of the changes is to speed up the application process, so prospective resort owners are able to get a decision on their applications in a reasonable amount of time.

At least four major ski resort proposals will be affected by the changes. Besides Jumbo Glacier they include a development on Canoe Mountain near Jasper National Park, one at Garibaldi Mountain about an hour North of Vancouver, and another at Cayoosh, about three hours North of Vancouver.

On top of that, virtually every existing ski resort in the province is looking to add new runs or hotel space, observers said

"What the government is doing is an excellent idea," said Jimmie Spencer, chief executive of Canada West Ski Areas Association. But Mr. Spencer cautioned that the government should take a critical look at each new proposal to ensure there is a business case "showing clearly that it will bring new tourism to the province" and not just poach business from other operators. "You want a sound policy of making the industry grow."

Jumbo Glacier is close to several other resorts, including Panorama, a regional resort developed by Intrawest Corp of Vancouver. Kicking Horse Mountain is also within easy driving distance.

Mr. Oberti concedes his project would undoubtedly attract skiers from Panorama, but he argues the bulk of his business would come from outside the province, from dedicated skiers living in places like New York and Toronto rather than day-tripping guests from other resorts.

For its part, Panorama has cautiously welcomed the prospect of a new resort in the area. Officials at Panorama have said that if Mr. Oberti can resolve some of the concerns over the environment, another resort in the area could potentially increase the appeal of the whole region as a ski destination.

But Mr. Oberti isn't about to break out the champagne yet. The future of Jumbo Glacier is still far from certain. He recently submitted his master plan to B.C. government. Under the new rules that means he can expect an answer as early as September.

"My clients are hopeful we will be able to move ahead," he said.

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