



Uphill battle

Bumper stickers, newsletters and protests over the proposed Jumbo Glacier Resort, amplified by negative media coverage, obscure the project's gathering support

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There was an almost mournful quality to the British Columbia government's announcement Thursday that the Jumbo Glacier Resort proposal has passed the provincial environmental assessment office's formidable criteria. The news release didn't even specifically state that the province had issued Jumbo's environmental assessment certificate. This is a key step enabling this stunning ski area concept in B.C.'s Purcell Mountains, first proposed 13 years ago, to move toward its master plan and, eventually, construction.

George Abbott, minister for sustainable resource management, gave a well-informed verbal presentation in Victoria, but his written statement is 90% hand-wringing. Headed, "Province Says Ultimate Jumbo Decision Up to Region," it noted dolefully that, "The environment [sic] assessment review panel has made 15 amendments and has required 195 changes to the proponents [sic] initial plan but there is a long way to go to conclusion."

No mention of the hundreds of jobs Jumbo will generate, the business opportunities and tax revenues it will unleash, nor the immense pleasure it will afford skiers and sight-seers from around the world. Instead, Abbott's message is: Folks, if 15 conditions and 195 additions don't seem like enough quicksand, we've got years of further obstruction and delay in the works!

Much of this may be pre-electioneering. B.C.'s government, farther from Jumbo than Alberta's capital, may be terminally spooked by the vocal opposition. To hear The Globe and Mail's Mark Hume tell it, this includes virtually everyone except resort proponent Oberto Oberti and ourselves, one of whom is an incurably afflicted alpine skier.

Given the meagre cheering section, Abbott & Co. perhaps figured fobbing off veto power to the locals was safer. But the anti-Jumbo bumper stickers, newsletters, pamphlets, protests and activism, amplified by overwhelmingly negative media coverage, obscure the project's gathering support.

The Shuswap Indian Band (Kinbasket People) lauded Oberti for his "professionalism and balance," while its development company signed an agreement to provide the project water and sewer services. Seventeen B.C. chiefs back the Shuswap's decision; one band opposes it. Rick Kunelius, Banff National Park's senior wildlife warden for 10 years, writes he's "in favour of the proposal," partly because "habitat modification to provide skiable terrain inadvertently enhances the overall habitat for wildlife."

While Invermere's mayor is skeptical, Radium Hot Springs' village council and mayor -- who's also chairman of the Regional District of the East Kootenay -- back Jumbo. So do the region's tourism associations and nearly every major employer. Nearby Panorama Resort dropped its longstanding, covert opposition. Its parent company, giant Intrawest Corp., tentatively supports Jumbo.

Grant Costello, an Invermere resident and former ski racing coach who recently became Oberti's vice-president, characterizes the dispute as an "ideological battle" disguised as a green crusade. Costello is a former member of Greenpeace. He now works to build local support for Jumbo.

Numerous residents, with vested interests and without, have come forward to urge Oberti on. All risk the ire of the bumper-sticker-and-protest crowd. "You're not talking about hacking open some wild, remote valley," notes Invermere resident John Hogg, a career mountain guide in Canada and the European Alps. "Environmentally, it's not pristine. It has a road, it's been logged, it had a mine with permanent residents for decades. You can drive almost all the way there."

Last week's announcement should please those who believe in responsible development. B.C.'s slow and complicated regulatory process -- Oberti has been working on Jumbo since 1991, spending buckets of cash, and it's still up to five years from start-up -- actually worked. The studies were done, the opponents were heard, and the proposal was substantially modified, including reducing the resort area and dropping some planned lifts.

Here's what the environmental assessment office said in its report:

On grizzly bears, it "determined that there is low risk that the project would result in a reduction of the grizzly bear population of such significance that the population in the Central Purcell [Grizzly Bear Population Unit] would be threatened." Grizzlies in the region are currently hunted.

On opposition by the local helicopter-skiing operator, the office noted that overlapping commercial tenures are part of maximizing the benefits of public land use. It is "satisfied that measures can be implemented...to avoid or address any potential material effect on R.K. Heli-Ski."

Regarding water quality, the report notes, "Wastewater would not be discharged into Jumbo Creek." It details how the resort will protect snow, ice, run-off and flowing water quality.

On the claim that Oberti is scheming to trick the province into funding a lavish highway, the report states, "The Proponent has committed to design and pay for resort access road improvements."

For 143 pages, the report assesses every conceivable risk, describes mitigation measures and blasts apart the opponents' canards left and right.

"The decision by Mr. Abbott and two fellow ministers shows that after nine years of very complex and at times emotional process, the system delivered a report and a decision," Oberti says. "We are relieved and pleased."

But the Italian-born, lifelong skier and Vancouver-based architect is disheartened by the mainstream news media's alarmism. "This is the project with the biggest vertical drop in North America. It's in the right climate, surrounded by incredible scenery, and it's of a scale to be competitive," says Oberti. "These [aspects] are fundamental to the viability of the project. But they don't even rate a mention in the CBC. The discussion is solely about process and who might have the power to kill it."

Oberti faces possibly years of further tough process before he'll take his inaugural gondola ride onto Glacier Dome, the ski area's core. The next step, gaining master plan approval, might be straightforward, since his environmental report to the province contained nearly everything in a master plan.

However, things could get tricky at the local level. The resort area lies within the Regional District of the East Kootenay. This is headed by an elected council. Traditionally, B.C.'s regional districts haven't stick-handled complex projects. Now that the province has done the heavy lifting on Jumbo, the district should focus on local technicalities, such as adherence to building

codes.

Oberti fears the local process could be exploited by opponents to achieve through intimidation and lawsuits what they failed to get through facts and argument. Other provinces, like Alberta, have clear demarcations of authority and an appeal mechanism, so vote-chasing local pols can't arbitrarily kill valid projects already approved at a higher level. But B.C. remains a planning wilderness, cleaved by jurisdictional crevasses and political fissures.

Local elections take place next year, so the district may feel compelled to hire consultants and demand studies, forcing Oberti to carry the same boulders up the same mountainside. Or it might buckle, nixing the resort on bogus grounds and forcing Oberti to appeal to the province. B.C. could bypass the regional district by carving out the required land and creating a "mountain resort municipality." It did so for Golden's Kicking Horse and for Whistler-Blackcomb. But that would require political will, something not yet in evidence.

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