

# Jumbo rhetoric over the whole process

**B**.C.'s government members have mostly avoided the Jumbo Glacier Resort issue. They left the field wide open to those who won't rest until this vision of a spectacular ski resort on the crown of the Purcell Mountains near Panorama Resort is consigned to the realm of fantasy. Every time the resort's proponents overcame another regulatory or legal challenge—most notably gaining their environmental certificate two years back—the opponents redoubled their efforts. Now, the project stands just weeks away from having its master development plan approved by the B.C. government. The opponents, who include a broad collection of environmentalists, several local mayors and councillors, and the local NDP opposition MLA, are trying to instigate what's expected to be a protracted, nasty zoning battle.

One elected politician intent on averting this is Bill Bennett, MLA for East Kootenay and the minister of mining in the Liberal government of Gordon Campbell. (For outsiders, B.C.'s Liberals include a lot of small "c" conservatives, forming a socially liberal, economically right-of-centre government.) In a series of interviews and press releases in late summer, Bennett came out swinging in favour of Jumbo and in defence of the province's project approval process.

"What drives me the hardest on this, I really believe in my heart of hearts that if B.C. is going to convince the world—and I mean the world—that we are a stable, reliable jurisdiction where you can bring your money and be treated fairly, then we have to show that our approval and assessment processes have some integrity," Bennett told Ski Canada in an interview in November. "This particular project has called into question whether B.C.'s processes do have integrity, because it's gone round and round and round for 15 years. There is obviously a

way to construct this resort while mitigating whatever [environmental] impact there might be. I don't know how we can, as a province, justify delaying this project any longer."

The idea of building a ski area in the high-elevation, big-vertical, huge-snowfall area of Glacier Dome and Jumbo Glacier dates back to the early '90s. It's the vision of Vancouver-based architect, designer and passionate lifelong skier Oberto Oberti. Oberti later also conceived and initially led the proposal for what became Kicking Horse Mountain Resort at Golden. In 1995, the NDP-instigated Commission on Resources and Environment (CORE), whose various regional panels were run by local stakeholders, held that building a ski resort at Jumbo was a suitable use for the area. Under intense pressure from a then-small group of opponents, CORE recommended the project first have an environmental review. The CORE plan became official provincial policy.

Significantly, CORE commissioner Stephen Owen called for any application to be decided "within strict time limits" and—most important to what's happening now—through a "one-window review." Fast-forward nine years. After an often rancorous, complex and expensive process, in which Oberti and his associates satisfied every government demand, B.C.'s environment ministry gave the resort its environmental approval, with 200 conditions. B.C.'s deputy minister of environment declared the project in the broad public interest.

The environmentalists, however, refused to accept they'd lost fair and square. They now began pushing the Regional District of East Kootenay (roughly, a county government) to repeat locally what Oberti had spent the past decade doing. They claim it's a matter of "democracy." Some even claim that the CORE process ruled against Jumbo.

One group, Wildsight, is demanding "a full public discussion"—something that's already occurred twice over the past 10 years.

Throughout this period, Oberti could have used some explicit provincial support. Bennett says he'd have loved to speak out sooner. But party protocol holds that the local government MLA serves as the government's voice on respective local issues, so Bennett had to defer to the local Liberal, who chose to keep a low profile. She was not re-elected last year, freeing Bennett to state his mind.

He certainly appears intent on making up for lost time. "The opponents [of Jumbo] are quite recognizable to me—they oppose every project of forestry, oil and natural gas, mining, resorts—basically everything that comes along," Bennett says. "It's their strategy to keep this file at the local level where they can impose pressure and intimidation on people." Far from standing up for democracy, Bennett says the opponents are "trying to subvert the process."

A few months ago the mayor of Sparwood proposed a resolution that the regional district hand the decision-making process to the province. Back in the mid-'90s, the regional district had proposed to do exactly this, but that policy had been overturned. Bennett and others insist that most councillors were initially supportive of restoring the old stance. But, he claims, councillors were subjected to "mob rule"—phone calls to their spouses and kids, "very nasty anonymous messages late at night," being accosted on the street, etc. The vote went the other way.

Zoning is usually a largely technical formality. At times, policy comes into play when, for example, a developer wants to turn age-old farmland into housing. The Jumbo area has never been zoned commercial, and the regional district has no development planning process for it. But the province is the area's owner—the landlord. And the resort is in accordance with provincial economic policy. Should county-style councillors be allowed to remake a democratically elected government's policy? Bizarrely, the regional district refused to participate in Jumbo's master plan review process. Should it now get veto power?

In Bennett's view, it's no to both. "I think that the RDEK is in over its head," he says.

“This is a large, provincial project. It’s far away from any community. If it was any other kind of project, the regional district would have nothing to do with it. It would simply be tenured and regulated on Crown land.” Instead, “Some board members want to start all over again, and do another environmental assessment. I’m not for a minute going to accept that they will duplicate a process that’s taken 15 years.”

What are the options? B.C. could legally designate Jumbo a mountain resort area, automatically zoned. The regional district could agree to re-zone Jumbo while maintaining administrative authority. The province could create a new municipal entity, delegating administration to Invermere, Radium or the regional district. (Radium and Sparwood are officially for the project, while Invermere is against it.) The worst-case scenario: no solution, continued impasse. It would be virtually unprecedented for a local government to block a provincially approved project occupying Crown land.

“My first choice, and my government’s first choice, is to do this in concert with the regional district,” says Bennett. “[But] we have final jurisdiction, there’s no doubt about that. [Jumbo] has jumped through every hoop. The government could make a decision that the project is clearly in the provincial interest, and that it should not be subjected to any additional hassles.”

The rhetoric over Jumbo may soon reach a new crescendo. But if Bennett’s views reflect those of Premier Campbell, I’d say the odds that skiers will be riding the “Oberti Express” and skiing down 1,800 vertical metres of the Purcell’s finest lift-serviced powder before the end of the decade are the best they’ve ever been.

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