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Taos Ski Valley hoping changes re-establish it as a premier destination

By Cody Olivas

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On Feb. 11, 1965, the front-page article of *The Taos News* showed a picture of a proposed lift that would carry skiers up to Taos Ski Valley's Kachina Peak.

Nearly 50 years later, the Kachina Peak Lift is a reality. No longer are skiers and riders going to be forced to spend almost an hour hiking to earn turns down Kachina's steep face. This winter the new lift will carry them from 11,000 feet up to 12,450 feet in just five minutes.

It's a game-changer that TSV hopes will put the mountain back on the map and establish the future of the Ski Valley.

The new lift is certainly the most visible thing Taos Ski Valley has done since Louis Bacon bought the ski area. It's gotten tons of national attention. The new lift, however, is only one of many changes happening at TSV.

At a community meeting held in the town of Taos (Nov. 6) TSV president Gordon Briner described four pillars the mountain is trying to build on — on-mountain improvements, base-area improvements, increasing the area's bed base and also changing how the Ski Valley is marketed.

In addition to the Kachina lift, other on-mountain improvements include the opening of some new hike-to terrain — the Wild West Glade. That area is located on the West Basin Ridge just past Wonder Bowl.

TSV also spent nearly \$750,000 upgrading its snowmaking equipment so the mountain can be less dependent on Mother Nature. The idea is that when Taos opens for the season, it will have a variety of terrain available for people to ride.

An inversion, with colder temps at the mountain's base limited where it could make snow for a while. On Monday (Nov. 17), however, TSV's snowmaking guns had been going for three days straight when colder temperatures rolled through.

When Taos opens for the season Thanksgiving Day, Nov. 27, White Feather and Powderhorn will both be open. By being able to blast 40-60 guns at a time, however, a trail like Porcupine could be ready in just a couple days. If temperatures stay cold, more terrain will be open too.

The success of the new Kachina Peak Lift this season will also help determine when they put in a West Basin lift. If the Kachina chair demonstrates that that's the type of terrain people are interested in riding, the West Basin lift will move up on the mountain's priorities. The Ski Valley also wants to replace Lift 5 — the double chair at the base area.

In addition to the on-mountain improvements, Taos has been busy off the slopes re-vamping its base area and other structures around the mountain.

This summer TSV remodeled Tenderfoot Katie's, the Martini Tree, Rhoda's, the Whistle Stop Cafe and the Phoenix. Those places all got new carpet, paint, light fixtures and mostly new furniture.

"We want to make sure we're sending the message that the entire operation has been upgraded," Briner said.

Next May, TSV will knock down the building that currently houses its ski school, rental and retail shops. After one season of temporary facilities, they'll construct a new building that will update their skier services and also provide over-night guests a place to stay. Adding beds is another big priority. That building will be completed in December 2016. TSV plans to continue working on the base area over the next decade. With more variety of shops and other amenities, the TSV plaza will be the heart of the base area village.

This season the mountain's shuttles will now drop people off at a new location — on Thunderbird road, across from the Alpine Village hotel. The new spot eliminates stairs and tunnels.

The last couple of seasons Taos has had about 222,000 skier visits each season. With all these changes, TSV insists it isn't trying to become another Vail. Briner said their ideal number would be between 350,000 and 400,000 skier visits — not 1.6 million like Breckenridge.