

TSV aims to reclaim industry prominence

By J.R. Logan

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The boggy, half-acre hole in the heart of Taos Ski Valley's base area isn't much to look at now. But officials at the resort hope the hotel that will soon sit on that property will help re-establish Taos as a top ski destination.

In April, just days after the resort closed for the ski season, crews demolished the concrete structure that served as the primary entrance to the ski area.

In its place, resort officials plan to open a 65-room hotel that will include a health club and swimming pool. The hotel is expected to be up and running by December 2016. This project is just one piece of a bigger plan to redesign the entrance to the resort, add lodging options in the base area and generally improve Taos' off-mountain experience. Over the next decade, the resort expects about \$350 million to go toward improvements, both on and off the slopes. But redesigning the base and constructing the hotel are a priority.

"This is really about necessity," says Taos Ski Valley CEO Gordon Briner.

All of this work — the "tens of millions of dollars going into that hole," as Briner puts it — is to bring more people to the mountain. And at least initially, that means regaining a lot of the ground that's been lost.

Back in the 1990s, the Ski Valley regularly counted more than 300,000 annual skier days, with a peak of 364,000 during the 1994/1995 season.

But things have slipped since then. Between 2000 and 2010, the resort averaged just 224,000 skier days a year — a drop of 25 percent at a time when the industry in general was growing.

One of Briner's mantras since he became CEO in December 2013 is that the on-mountain experience at the Ski Valley be world class, but the available amenities and look of the base area are lacking. Specifically, Briner thinks there just isn't enough lodging to make Taos Ski Valley competitive.

"Taos Ski Valley has fewer beds for rent today than it had 20 years ago," Briner says. "And even when we had those beds, we felt we were short on beds."

In all, Briner estimates there are a lot more than 100 fewer beds in the valley. And he thinks that's having a huge impact on the Ski Valley's bottom line.

“There are people that ski, and when they do their ski vacation, they stay at the base area,” Briner says. “And if there’re no beds in the base area, they’ll go somewhere else.”

To solve that problem, Briner says the Ski Valley (under its new owner, billionaire Louis Bacon) wants its major redevelopment to be done right.

“Most developers and resort operations see the formula that if you build condominiums then you’ve got something to sell,” Briner says.

The condo model is one that’s been adopted by a lot of ski resorts in the West. And the return on investment usually comes much quicker. Briner estimates spec condos pay off in just a couple of years if they sell.

But the return on investment for a hotel is likely much longer. A big hotel is expensive to build and expensive to operate. It also generates revenue more slowly.

However, Briner says in the long run, there are more advantages to the hotel, primarily giving guests a place to stay that is just a few footsteps from the chairlift. “As an organization, we took a longer-term approach. By building hotel rooms, we fill the need. There’s patience to do this correctly, even if it takes a little bit longer to get the payback.”

Briner argues it’s logical to conclude that a modern lodging facility will attract more people.

“It means we have a better chance of providing a great experience for people that come here,” Briner says. “And when we’re providing that better experience, hopefully more people come here. And for us, more initially means getting back to that 350,000 [skier days] number.”

Even when the hotel is operating, Briner says he doesn’t expect visitor numbers to spike in a single season. He does think it’s realistic to expect an average 5-to-10 percent increase in skier numbers each season.

The corporation’s foray into the hotel business means another step toward vertical integration — a business model under which the ski resort owns everything from the rental shops to the lifts to the lodging. Last year, the Ski Valley bought the Bavarian Lodge and Restaurant on the mountain’s backside. The new hotel will give it a solid anchor point in the center of the main base area as well.

“We’re really focused on the family experience,” Briner says. “We’re certainly not going to exclude anybody, but we think this is the ideal village for people to bring their families, largely because of the scale.”

Briner explains the ski area’s base area already has an intimate feel that’s safe and inviting. Parents staying in the base area often let their kids run loose among the shops, hotels and restaurants that make up a tiny town that exists largely unto itself.

Compare that to a lot of true ski towns, especially in Colorado, where the lifts come right to a main street lined with lively bars, traffic and generally more action. “If you’re young and single and want to have a good time, Breckenridge [Colorado] may be a better place to go than Taos if you’re as interested in the time off the mountain,” Briner says.

“Our first goal is to get back to where we were 20 years ago in terms of skier visits,” Briner says.

And he thinks the redevelopment will go a long way in wooing many of the same people who used to vacation at Taos Ski Valley. “Our first target audience is to get the people that have been here before that loved it, but left because the lodging got out of date or we ran out of lodging, or there wasn’t enough of a reason to come back for the eighth, ninth, 20th year.”

In reviewing ticket sales data, Briner says one of the biggest decreases the company has seen is in the sale of multi-day passes — people who buy a five- or sixday lift ticket and spend a whole vacation at the resort.

“We want to get that group back first, and we think that group is actually bigger than it was 20 years ago,” Briner says.

There might be a few challenges in selling Taos Ski Valley as a family-friendly option, in part because of the success the mountain had in defining itself as an expert’s haven of challenging terrain. (Consider the infamous “Don’t panic!” sign at the base of chair 1 assuring new guests the whole mountain isn’t as freakishly steep as the daunting pitch on Al’s Run.) But Briner says that reputation could actually be used to attract people who’ve never been on skis or a snowboard. Taos Ski Valley can be “broader in its message,” Briner says, by appealing to “adventurous” people, regardless of their skiing ability.

“We’ve done a terrific job of letting people know that there’s great advanced, steep skiing in New Mexico to the point that some people have shied away from Taos,” Briner says. “But then you talk to them, and they find out they could have a great time here.”

Briner says there’s not an age group or income demographic being targeted. Instead, Taos wants to attract a personality type. “If you’ve got a go-for-it, adventuresome spirit, even if you’ve never skied before, come to Taos.”

First, the building has to get done. Crews are currently working 12-hour shifts, seven days a week to take advantage of the summer.

Brian Cruz, project superintendent with Jaynes Corp., says there are as many as 40 people on the job site at the moment.

Excavation crews have about three weeks’ of dirt work left before construction of the foundation can begin. When the concrete and steel frame are in place (possibly by August), Cruz says the number of workers — from door hangers to roofers to brick layers to concrete masons — will hit almost 300.

“It’s just going to explode,” Cruz said. And he says that fevered pace won’t stop — even through the winter — until the building is done.



Katharine Egli

Gordon Briner, left, and Brian Cruz, project superintendent with Jaynes Corp., discuss the timeline for base area developments in the Taos Ski Valley administrative offices Monday (June 1).



Katharine Egli

Crews work Monday (June 1) on excavation work at the site of a future 65-room hotel, a keystone of Taos Ski Valley's new base area improvements.