



Soldier Mountain Ski Resort's down-home style and short lift lines give it the feel of a sleepy, mom-and-pop affair. But mountain managers who have presented a massive expansion plan say it's time for the resort to wake up.

Situated where the scenic Soldier Mountains begin to taper off on their eastern end, it's a popular destination for skiers hailing from nearby Fairfield, on the Camas Prairie, as well as other south-central Idaho communities.

Compared to Sun Valley, its glitzy cousin just a 62-mile drive away to the northeast, Soldier Mountain seems downright homey. Perhaps the resort's biggest claim to fame is actor Bruce Willis, whose Valley Entertainment Group owns and operates the ski hill on public land under a Forest Service special-use permit.

The mountain does have the kind of stats skiers and snowboarders find alluring.

The mountain boasts 1,150 acres of inbound terrain, and its three lifts provide access to a total vertical rise of 1,425 feet. Soldier Mountain is only open Thursdays through Sundays except during the Christmas holiday. Soldier Mountain powder days have been known to draw a few Sun Valley devotees over the hill to take advantage of the deep, untracked snow the three-day breaks can create.

The ski area's \$33 adult and \$23 youth daily lift rates help ensure its billing as a place for "family skiing at affordable rates."

But significant changes may be coming to this isolated ski hill. Planners envision a future for the low-key hill that includes artificial snowmaking, the addition of up to four new ski lifts, trail clearing and a new base lodge.

In October, they submitted an in-depth master plan to the Sawtooth National Forest's Fairfield Ranger District that details the direction they'd like to take Soldier Mountain in the coming decades.

### **Hoping for growth**

Though skier numbers at Soldier Mountain have shown a steady rise in recent years, they're still far below some of the ski area's neighboring competitors. According to figures included in the master plan, 16,061 visitors took to the mountain during the 2007-08 season, while the area saw 11,842 skier visits in 2006-07.

During the five-year period prior to that, Soldier Mountain averaged just 8,907 skier visits each season.

By comparison, the document states that Sun Valley Resort received more than 400,000 skier visits in 2007-08, while Bogus Basin Ski Resort north of Boise received more than 300,000.

Though they hope to draw more skiers to the area in the years to come, planners say they hope to maintain the mountain's family-oriented and community-based feel. The plan's phased approach envisions going ahead with the upgrades only as the ski area begins to draw higher visitation.

The first upgrade planners envision for the mountain, should the master plan gain Forest Service approval, is a significant artificial snowmaking system. Maps included in the document show it covering several trails stretching from the base area to the summit of Soldier Peak as well as on several trails on the peak's northern aspect.

The master plan states that snowmaking would be installed when the ski area begins to draw 20,000 skiers per year. A small-scale snowmaking system already exists at the mountain, though it hasn't been in use for some time because of issues with the intake system on Soldier Creek, said Shelly Scott, a spokeswoman for Valley Entertainment, which is based in Hailey.

The master plan calls for those problems to be fixed immediately, which would allow for a "guaranteed opening date to the season," the document states.

In terms of the proposed new ski lifts, a variety of lift types are envisioned. The main new lift, which would whisk skiers from the base area to the 7,150-foot summit of Soldier

Peak, is envisioned as a detachable quad. It would provide a quicker route to the summit, which is now only accessible by two back-to-back, fixed-grip chairlifts.

Two additional medium-length lifts are proposed as fixed-grip triple chairs, while a fourth lift is proposed as a "teaching carpet" that would be located next to the summit chair and skier services building at the base area.

In all, the new lifts would take the ski area from its existing 2,400-skiers-per-hour capacity to 9,600-skiers-per-hour capacity.

## **Pushing the boundaries**

The new lifts on the north and west sides of Soldier Peak would provide improved access to the area's many glades and open parks, the master plan states. Though already accessible under the existing lift-served scenario, the addition of these new lifts would significantly improve skier access to the area's moderate- to expert-level terrain, the planners say.

"There's just a lot of places we could utilize that would be great runs," Scott said.

Several inbounds areas on that side of the mountain that are currently accessible only by hiking a short distance would remain that way under the planned expansion.

However, the expansion plans aren't just about improving access for more experienced skiers. Near the base of the mountain planners hope to re-grade some of the slopes to make them more "beginner friendly," Scott said.

The document states that a new base lodge would be built once the mountain begins attracting 30,000 visitors each season. It also mentions the possibility of an "on-mountain facility."

Scott said planners don't yet have a total cost estimate for the upgrades.

"Obviously costs could change quite dramatically in five years," she said.

The current expansion plans would not have an impact on Soldier Mountain's popular out-of-bounds cat skiing operation, which gives skiers and snowboarders access to a vast area of skiable terrain higher in the Soldier Mountains to the west.

However, the improvements may just be the beginning for expansion of the ski area, which began operating clear back in 1948 with a single rope tow. The Soldier Mountain plan does leave the door open to even more development should skier numbers greatly increase.

The site of the area's out-of-bounds cat skiing on "Peak 1" and "Peak 2," to the west of the ski area boundary, provides terrain suitable to further expansion, the document states.

"The terrain characteristics and features found in the approximately 1,800 acres of terrain would be the size and caliber of a destination mountain," the plan says. "This terrain is comprised of large, high-elevation, open bowls, steep chutes, gladed parks as well as treed valleys."

The document also teases at the possibility of needing overnight lodging opportunities in the vicinity of the ski area for skier numbers to really take off.

"Significant private land exists in the vicinity of Soldier Mountain in order to support the much-needed bed base," it states.

No one at the Fairfield Ranger District was available for comment by press time.

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