

Taos Ski Valley's 2010 Master Development Plan—Phase 1 Proposed Projects

Background

The majority of Taos Ski Valley's (TSV) lift and trail network is located on National Forest System (NFS) lands administered by the Carson National Forest (NF). The Carson NF authorizes TSV to conduct its activities under the terms of a Special Use Permit (SUP). In April 2010, the Carson NF accepted TSV's 2010 Master Development Plan (MDP), which conceptually identifies opportunities for, and constraints to, meeting the recreational goals of the ski area across both private and NFS lands. Shortly thereafter, the Carson NF received a formal proposal from the ski area to implement specific elements from the 2010 MDP, referred to as the "Phase 1 MDP Projects" (figure 1). The Carson NF accepted the Phase 1 proposal; however, prior to implementation, all proposed projects must undergo site-specific environmental analysis in compliance with the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA). Upon acceptance of this proposal and initiation of the NEPA process, this became a Forest Service proposed action. Although the phase 1 proposed projects are directly linked to TSV's 2010 MDP, the ski area is operated on public lands administered by Carson NF.

Purpose and Need

Guest expectations and demands continue to evolve in today's competitive skier/rider market, and resorts must continually focus on raising service standards and improving the overall recreational experience. While TSV's board of directors made the decision to allow snowboarding in 2008, the ski area has not made any significant infrastructural or qualitative improvements over the past two decades, and in the process has failed to evolve commensurate with the demands and expectations of its market. As a result, TSV is actually experiencing lower annual visitation than it did in the mid-90s.

TSV is an important contributor to the recreational and socioeconomic dynamic of the Taos area. Therefore, in order to remain economically viable in the competitive destination skier/rider market and continue to provide a quality recreational experience into the future, TSV needs to refocus on meeting its guests' demands and expectations. Projects included in the proposed action have been specifically designed in response to six categories of identified opportunities and constraints at TSV. These categories, defined below, are introduced in TSV's accepted 2010 MDP.

Purpose & Need #1: Improving Lift Service to High-Alpine, Advanced Intermediate and Expert Terrain within the SUP Area

TSV's unique offering of in-bounds, experts-only terrain helps define its reputation throughout the ski industry. However, much of this terrain is only accessible by hiking from the top of Chairs 2 and 6 (along West Basin Ridge and Highline Ridge), and even for those who are physically able and familiar with TSV, some of most remote hike-to terrain requires a 45-minute hike to reach. There is a need for lift-served, high alpine terrain at TSV to respond to the growing demand (as witnessed throughout the ski industry), while holding true to TSV's longstanding reputation for low trail densities, diverse terrain, and quality snow conditions.

Purpose & Need #2: Improving Access to Heavily Treed Portions of the Existing SUP Area

Throughout the existing SUP area, there are examples of undeveloped terrain—including glades, chutes and steps—that are either accessible from within TSV's developed lift and trail network

or by hiking. However, some of these areas are either too tight, or too difficult to access, by a large segment of TSV's clientele, and are therefore underutilized. There is a need for improving access to and use of specific portions of the existing SUP area that would help address the growing demand for gladed terrain.

Purpose & Need #3: Providing Quality Alternative Winter and Summer Opportunities within the SUP Area

Snowtubing is an extremely popular alternative winter activity at resorts across the country. Currently, TSV's guests can rent snowtubes on the lower section of Strawberry Hill, walk up the hill (often waiting long periods for their turn), and then descend a more-or-less wide-open slope. Because Strawberry Hill is important teaching terrain for TSV Ski School, it is not feasible to create or maintain any designated, permanent tubing lanes, and TSV can only offer this activity after hours.

Quality, alternative winter activities are needed at TSV that compliment traditional skiing and riding. A well designed, dedicated snowtubing facility, with a lift, is an amenity that has a demand at TSV, as demonstrated seasonally by the number of guests that use Strawberry Hill for snowtubing. Likewise, snowshoeing is not currently offered at TSV, but represents an opportunity for a low-impact, added amenity for guests who seek other forms of winter recreation in a forested setting.

During the summer months, due to its elevation and climate (as well as its existing infrastructure), TSV has tremendous potential to provide recreational activities that are not currently offered in northern New Mexico. Summer activities at TSV are limited to chairlift rides on Lift 1. Lift-served mountain biking is an opportunity that TSV could easily and effectively offer to existing and potential summer clientele (both visitors and locals). This would allow guests to experience their national forest in a way they would otherwise not be able.

There is a need for quality alternatives to the existing winter and summer opportunities offered at TSV.

Purpose & Need #4: Improving TSV's Antiquated Lift Network

TSV's entire lift network is composed of fixed-grip chairlifts, with the exception of three surface conveyors on teaching terrain in the base area. The on-mountain lift network dates back to 1973 (Lift 5). Strategic lift replacements would increase out-of-base capacity, improve operational efficiencies of the lift network, and increase utilization of some of TSV's most popular terrain, namely the Lift 4 and Lift 7 pods. There is a need for improving the efficiency and utilization of TSV's existing lift system.

Purpose & Need #5: Improving Resort Access at TSV

The majority of TSV guests park in a series of day lots and ride a shuttle to the base area. A small percentage of guests either walk to the base area after parking their cars or are dropped off near the guard house, requiring the vehicle to circulate back through the parking lots to find an available space. The drop-off area/turnaround is located at the Pagoda on Sutton Place Road; however, in its current configuration, the drop-off area does not contribute to a sense of arrival for guests accessing the mountain, which is an important element in defining the guest experience.

All guests (regardless of whether they ride shuttles from parking lots or are dropped off in personal vehicles, or walk from their cars) must walk through the village to access ticketing/guest services and Lift 1. A 30+ foot grade change between the bridge at the Pagoda and Lift 1 is difficult for guests to ascend/descend, especially in ski boots, carrying gear, and/or accompanying children. There is a need for an on-grade pedestrian access route from the shuttle drop-off to skier services and Lift 1.

Purposed & Need #6: Improving Vehicular Circulation throughout the Day Parking Lots

Traffic circulation through TSV's parking areas is encumbered by the nature of the long, narrow lots, particularly in the eastern lots closest to the base area. This is mostly problematic for residents who must drive through these lots to reach Twining Road (i.e., there is no thoroughfare). Similar to Purpose and Need #5, parking circulation contributes to the initial recreational experience or sense of arrival at a ski area. Therefore, there is a need for improving traffic circulation throughout TSV's day lots (for both guests and residents).

Proposed Action

To meet the purpose and need described above, the Forest Service is proposing to authorize the following projects within TSV's special use permit area (figure 1). Most of these projects are identified in TSV's 2010 MDP that was accepted by the Carson Forest Supervisor in April 2010. Implementation of these projects would take place over the course of five to ten years. It is important to note that all proposed projects and activities are located within TSV's existing 1,268-acre SUP area, administered by the Carson NF.

Proposed projects that respond to the need for improving lift service to high-alpine, advanced intermediate and expert terrain within the SUP area (P&N #1) are:

- The Main Street Lift
- The Ridge Lift

New Main Street Lift

The proposed Main Street Lift would be accessible from Chair 4. It would extend up the ridge, to an elevation of 12,466 feet. This fixed-grip chairlift would provide direct, roundtrip access to approximately 1,100 vertical feet of expert terrain, eliminating an approximate 45- to 60-minute hike that is currently required from the top of Lift 2 to reach this highest point in elevation by hiking along Highline Ridge. With installation of the proposed Main Street Lift, approximately 63 acres of lift-served terrain would be incorporated into TSV's lift network. The capacity of the proposed lift would be roughly 1,200 people-per-hour (pph). By design, this would be a low capacity lift that is in response to the type and amount of terrain that it would serve.

It is important to note that the concept for the proposed Main Street Lift can be traced back decades at TSV. This lift was first contemplated by Ernie Blake in 1965, with numerous references thereafter. It was included in TSV's original 1981 MDP, which was accepted by the Carson NF in 1981.

New Ridge Lift

The proposed Ridge Lift would provide access to existing and proposed terrain off West Basin Ridge, which is currently hike-to only. This fixed-grip triple chairlift would be relatively short—approximately 800 feet long and 500 vertical feet. Round-trip use of the proposed Ridge Lift

would require riding Lift 8 to return to its bottom terminal. New terrain to be served by the proposed Ridge Lift is discussed under “Gladed Expert Terrain” below.

Proposed projects that respond to the need for improving access to heavily treed portions of the existing SUP area (P&N #2) are:

- The Minnesota Glades
- The Wild West Glades

Additional expert glades are proposed to be incorporated within the lift-served trail network. Under the proposed action, gladed areas would increase from roughly 74 acres under the existing conditions to approximately 182 acres, by creating two new gladed areas—the Minnesota Glades and the Wild West Glades. In terms of tree spacing and ability level, the Minnesota and Wild West Glades would resemble the recently constructed North American Glades

In conjunction with proposed glades, TSV would work with the Carson NF to assemble a glading plan that is responsive to both the resort’s operational/recreational needs, as well as the Carson NF’s forest health objectives. The glading plan would address elements such as, but not limited to, species and size selection, tree mortality (i.e., targeting dead/dying trees), percent removal, and habitat characteristics.

Minnesota Glades

The proposed Minnesota Glades would be created with varying percentages of tree removal (between 10 and 50 percent) across a roughly 70-acre area to support expert skiing and riding. Initial field surveys indicate a high mortality of subalpine fir in this area; as a result, the Engelmann spruce trees are healthy. Therefore, it is anticipated that glading in this area could be completed with a minimal amount of impact to live trees.

Wild West Glades

The proposed Wild West Glades would contribute approximately 35 acres of expert terrain, accessible from the proposed Ridge Lift (previously discussed). Skiers and riders would be directed back to Lower Stauffenberg, instead of descending below the Lift 8 bottom terminal. Inherently, gladed terrain necessitates skiers and riders to have a relatively high ability level. There are adequate Advanced Intermediate slopes present within this area and, combined with a tree clearing prescription that is intended to create large, navigable openings, the Wild West Glades would be appropriate for both Advanced Intermediates and Experts.

Proposed projects that respond to the need for providing quality alternative winter and summer opportunities within the SUP area (P&N #3) are:

- Taos Adventure Center
- Lift-served mountain bike trails

Taos Adventure Center

The proposed Taos Adventure Center would offer a dedicated snowtubing facility within the northwestern portion of TSV’s SUP area. Snowshoeing on marked interpretative trails (1.5 to 2 miles in length) would further supplement non-sliding winter activities. Yurts would accommodate guest services. The tubing operation would accommodate approximately 90 guests per hour, while the snowshoe trails have been designed to accommodate up to 75 guests at-one-time.

The Adventure Center would include four distinct lanes, varying from 650 to 800 feet long and separated by snow berms. A roughly 660 foot long carpet conveyor lift would bring tubers from the run-out to the top. A small building would be constructed at the bottom of the tubing lift for tube storage.

By providing a dedicated tubing facility, TSV would be able to offer tubing throughout the afternoon without interrupting skiers and riders on Strawberry Hill (which is currently the case). Installation of a low-level lighting system would allow TSV to continue snowtubing into the evening, which would benefit overnight guests and day skiers/riders who wish to extend their day.

Parking would be provided in the existing parking lot directly across the Rio Hondo for Adventure Center guests. A yet-to-be determined number of parking spaces in TSV's day lots would be reserved for the Adventure Center Tubing, and TSV would operate a shuttle to this facility from the base area. A bridge would provide access over the Rio Hondo between the shuttle drop-off/parking area and the Adventure Center.

In order to properly construct tubing lanes properly, snowmaking would be necessary. Therefore, TSV plans to extend existing snowmaking lines from Chair 3, across the snowcat road, to the Adventure Center. TSV holds sufficient water rights to add the Adventure Center to its snowmaking system.

TSV would construct and operate restroom facilities on the north (i.e., parking lot) side of the Rio Hondo. By locating the restrooms in this location, they would be available for both Adventure Center guests and day skiers parking in the Deer, Eagle and Gila lots. Water and sewer lines would be connected to the main Village lines, which are buried under Ocean Blvd.

Approximately 3.7 acres of ground disturbance and tree clearing would be needed to construct the Adventure Center. A bridge would be constructed over the Rio Hondo between the parking lot and the Adventure Center, to accommodate pedestrian access, as well as, construction and maintenance access.

Lift-Served Mountain Bike Trails

A 3.6-mile, lift-served mountain bike trail is proposed between the top of Lift 1 and the base area. Cyclists would be able to ride Lift 1 and descend this trail during TSV's summer operation period. This mountain bike trail has been planned to minimize the need for tree removal, limit ground disturbance by strategically locating switchbacks on naturally occurring benches, and placing trail segments in areas currently cleared for ski trails. Conflicts with mountain operations vehicles would be minimized by locating trails away from the existing service roads. With an average grade of 8.5 percent, this trail is designed to minimize the need for pedaling and breaking to provide a fun experience for riders of most ability levels.

Proposed projects that respond to the need for improving TSV's antiquated lift network (P&N #4) are:

- Replacement of Lift 4
- Replacement of Lift 5
- Replacement of Lift 7

Upgrade Lift 4 (Kachina Lift)

The existing Lift 4 (a fixed-grip quad installed in 1991) is proposed to be replaced and upgraded to a detachable quad. Given this lift's importance, relatively low hourly capacity (1,800 pph), and length, the replacement of the Kachina Lift with a high-speed detachable quad would more efficiently serve the terrain within this pod. A detachable lift installed in the Lift 4 alignment would cut the ride time by more than half—to 4.5 minutes.

Upgrade Lift 5 (High Five)

With a capacity of 2,100 pph, Lift 1 is the highest capacity lift at TSV. However, it does not provide the out-of-base capacity necessary during busy periods at the resort; therefore it is augmented periodically by Lift 5 (a fixed-grip double chairlift), installed in 1973. Due to its redundancy with Lift 1, but more importantly because of its age, low hourly capacity and long ride time, it is operated on a limited schedule. This includes peak days and holidays when extra out-of-base capacity is needed to supplement the out-of-base role of Lift 1 and on Sundays/Mondays for ski school.

While the 2010 MDP includes a conceptual out-of-base lift that would take skiers and riders all the way to the summit, TSV does not plan on pursuing that project in the foreseeable future due to its high cost. Therefore, Lift 5 is proposed to be replaced with a high-speed detachable quad chairlift with a capacity of approximately 2,400 pph. This would substantially increase out-of-base capacity, and would reduce the need for operating two out-of-base lifts simultaneously. The replaced/upgraded Lift 5 would be in the exact same alignment as the existing lift.

Upgrade Lift 7 (Maxie's)

The existing Lift 7 (a fixed-grip triple) is proposed to be replaced in its current alignment and upgraded to a fixed grip quad. The replacement of Lift 7 is intended to increase utilization of beginner, intermediate, and advanced terrain, the Out-To-Launch Terrain Park, and expert glades and chutes. The proposed upgraded lift would have a capacity of approximately 1,800 pph.

The proposed project that responds to the need for improving resort access at TSV (P&N #5) is:

Reconfigured/Relocated Guest and Shuttle Drop-Off

The proposed action includes projects on NFS lands that are designed to address pedestrian access between the parking lots and the base area, as well as, traffic circulation through the parking lots. Ultimately, these projects are designed help create a "sense of arrival" at TSV, which is currently lacking.

Although a new guest drop-off area is proposed, Sutton Place Road would maintain its role as vehicular access for guests staying at Edelweiss, Snakedance, and the Hotel St. Bernard. While it would be a slightly longer walk for guests, the proposed eastern drop-off area on Thunderbird Road has been designed with the following objectives:

- It would eliminate the need for all steps between the drop-off area and the base of Lift 1. Currently there is a 30-foot grade differential between the shuttle/guest drop-off on Sutton Place Road and the base of Lift 1.
- This location would provide guests with a visual orientation to the lifts and the core village when departing the shuttles, which is an important contributor to the sense of arrival at any resort.

- Pedestrians would continue to be able to use the path parallel to Sutton Place Road to access the base area or have the option to access the base area through the new eastern drop off.

The proposed project that responds to the need for improving vehicular circulation throughout the day parking lots (P&N #6) is:

Reconfiguration of the Eastern Portion of TSV's Day Lots (i.e., Armadillo, Bison, and Bear lots)

The attached map depicts how TSV's eastern day parking lots (Armadillo, Bear, Bison and Coyote) are planned to be reconfigured to better accommodate traffic circulation and pedestrian access to the base area. The proposed action includes projects designed to better separate different types of guests, including those who are:

- parking for the day
- being dropped off
- accessing the village core
- going to overnight lodging facilities
- driving to private residences.

An extra parking bay would be added north of the Armadillo lot, and the Bear and Bison lots would be slightly reconfigured to allow Bison to become a thoroughfare—primarily for residents of Taos Ski Valley driving to Twining Road. There would be no net gain or loss of day parking spaces with the proposed action.