

Inland Northwest ski areas aim for 'average'

Some resorts forge ahead with projects, growth plans

Mike McLean

November 5th, 2015



—Boden Mountain Architecture LLC

A \$3.8 million summit lodge, which will have full-service dining and lodging accommodations, is under construction and expected to be completed next fall at Schweitzer Mountain Resort.

Coming off a severe snow drought, Inland Northwest ski areas are expecting average snow accumulations for the upcoming seasons, and average would be good enough for them.

A few resorts have big projects planned or underway. They include plans to open up new ski terrain at Mt. Spokane Ski & Snowboard Park, ongoing construction of a summit lodge at Schweitzer Mountain Resort, near Sandpoint, and installing initial infrastructure for a planned ski community at 49 Degrees North Mountain Resort, near Chewelah, Wash.

Meantime, resort managers and marketers are hearing forecasts that normal snow conditions will return, lifting hopes for the resorts to open on or before the Thanksgiving weekend, as some had done for a few years prior to the last disastrous season.

“I’ll take average any day compared with a year like last year,” says Brad McQuarrie, general manager at Mt. Spokane.

Eric Bakken, general manager at 49 Degrees North, also doesn't expect a repeat of last year's snow drought. Just in case Mother Nature needs a little help here and there, though, the resort has acquired two new snowmaking fan guns, he says.

Mt. Spokane

McQuarrie says Mt. Spokane expects to obtain permits as soon as this month from the Spokane County for a 279-acre terrain expansion that would add seven major runs and a chairlift on the northwest side of the mountain.

"We're getting close to getting terrain permits," he says of the proposal. "We'll start this fall and work all the way through the winter."

McQuarrie says it likely will take two years to complete the expansion.

The expansion cost is expected to exceed \$800,000, including more than \$320,000 that Mount Spokane 2000, the ski area's nonprofit operator, has invested in planning and environmental studies over a number of years.

Meantime, Mount Spokane is in the midst of capital improvements costing \$1.5 million.

"We've been productive through the long summer, and we're working all the way through this fall," McQuarrie says. "Everyone coming up will see some big improvements."

The main lodge, also known as Lodge 2, has a new roof and main-level carpeting, while the smaller Lodge 1 has been completely revamped, McQuarrie says.

"Lodge 1 hadn't seen much if any work since the '60s," he says .

Improvements include new entrances with improved parking lot access, and new restrooms on the lower level.

A new guest-services building also is being planned for the parking lot level near the Ski Patrol building. The guest-services building will host a snow Sports Center, ski school programs, a daycare center, and an expanded rental shop, McQuarrie says.

Construction is expected to begin next year and to be completed in 2017.

McQuarrie says Mt. Spokane plans to hire up to 300 part-time employees in the upcoming season.

Mt. Spokane currently has five chairlifts, 45 runs, and a vertical drop of 2,000 feet.

Full-priced adult lift tickets are \$52 on weekends and holidays, and \$39 on midweek nonholiday dates.

49 Degrees North

Earlier this year, 49 Degrees North Mountain Resort, about 60 miles north of Spokane, began marketing the first phase of an ambitious plan to turn the resort into a destination ski community.

“We’re starting to recapitalize the entire resort, building ski-in, ski-out housing,” Bakken says.

The resort is marketing Alpine Glades, the first of three subdivisions in the envisioned \$500 million-plus Sunrise Basin Development that would have up to 2,200 residential units, 800 hotel rooms, and up to 360,000 square feet of commercial space.

Hill Architects, of Portland, and Studio Cascade Inc., of Spokane, are designing the development and Canada-based Stantec Inc. is providing engineering services through its Spokane office.

The Sunrise Basin development site is on 320 acres of privately owned land surrounded by 2,100 acres of U.S. Forest Service land on which 49 Degrees North operates under a long-term lease.

To kick off the development, the ski area is constructing a \$1.8 million, 1.3-mile section of road that will extend Flowery Trail Road inside the resort to the planned Alpine Glades subdivision site, which is near the base of the Sunrise quad chairlift. The project includes installing fiber-optic lines and Avista utilities.

The gravel road will meet county specifications this ski season, and it will be paved next spring, Bakken says.

Meantime, the road will lead to two new 24-foot yurts and a connecting deck that 49 Degrees North is constructing at the base of the Sunrise chairlift. The resort is acting as its own contractor on the yurt project, and Copeland Architecture & Construction Inc., of Spokane, designed it.

In other ski improvements, 49 Degrees North has brought in 10,000 cubic yards of fill to level out its teaching area. “It will make a big difference for learning how to ski and snowboard,” Bakken says. “The old teaching area was about half as big.”

The resort expects to have 200 employees and 120 volunteers at the peak of the season, Bakken says.

The ski area has seven lifts, 82 runs, and a vertical drop of 1,850 feet.

Adult lift tickets are \$55 on weekends and holidays, and \$49 midweek.

Schweitzer

Schweitzer Mountain Resort, near Sandpoint, about 90 miles northeast of Spokane, is working on capital improvements valued at \$6 million.

The largest current project at the resort is a \$3.8 million lodge under construction near the summit of the resort’s Great Escape quad lift.

Idagon Homes LLC, of Sandpoint, is the contractor on the three-story, 13,000 square-foot project.

Boden Mountain Architecture LLC, also of Sandpoint, designed and engineered the project.

The summit lodge will include a full-service restaurant and bar, a cafeteria, lodging, event space, and a new home for the ski patrol dispatch.

The project is scheduled to be completed next fall.

On the mountain, Schweitzer's trail crew has completed brush cutting in Outback Bowl with work ongoing in other areas.

Schweitzer also has replaced its stock of adult alpine rental equipment with new Rossignol Experience skis.

The 2,900-acre ski area has three terrain parks, 92 runs, and a vertical drop of 2,400 feet.

The resort employs 500 to 700 people throughout the ski season.

Adult full-day lift tickets are \$73.

Silver Mountain

Silver Mountain Resort, near Kellogg, about 70 miles east of Spokane, anticipates opening Nov. 27, snow conditions permitting, and the ski area will operate Fridays through Sundays, until it opens for daily operations in mid-December.

New this year, Silver Mountain will be open seven days a week Dec. 18 through April 4, says Neal Scholey, the resort's marketing director.

In recent years, the resort had been closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays throughout the ski season.

Scholey says Silver Rapids water park has been helping to attract more visitors to Silver Mountain throughout the week.

"We're getting more destination visitors, especially out of Seattle," Scholey says. "The water park is keeping lodging full and a lot of kids happy."

Entry to Silver Rapids water park is included in the resort's Morning Star Lodging rentals.

On the slopes, Scholey says, the mountain house has a fresh look, and new carpet and paint.

"All of the equipment is ready to roll," he adds. "The mountain team is cutting brush to allow skier access to more terrain earlier in season."

Silver Mountain plans to open with 180 employees and hopes to ramp up to 230 employees at the peak of the season, Scholey says.

The 1,600-acre ski area has 74 runs, two terrain parks, and a vertical drop of 2,200 feet. In addition to its famous gondola, Silver Mountain has five chairlifts on the ski hill and a conveyor lift on its tubing hill.

Adult full-day lift tickets are \$54 on most days, and \$58 during holiday periods.

Lookout Pass

Lookout Pass Ski & Recreation area, located about 90 miles east of Spokane on the Idaho-Montana border, plans to bring back Powder Wednesdays, which it introduced last year, says Jason Bergman, Lookout's director of marketing and sales.

"We were typically closed on Tuesdays and Wednesdays," he says. "We will be open and in operation on Wednesdays in January and February. We had really good response to that last year."

As a summer project this year, the mountain crew cut brush to maximize early season terrain, Bergman says.

Lookout Pass has an average annual snowfall of 400 inches, although it had less than half of that last year.

"That was an anomaly," he says. "We're speaking to meteorologists and they don't expect anything like that again. We're expecting a decent season."

Lookout has 540 acres and is conducting environmental studies for a planned expansion that would add 700 acres of new terrain.

"We're anticipating that we will begin the expansion in the spring of 2017," Bergman says.

He says Lookout Pass likely will have a peak of 150 employees and volunteers combined during the season.

Lookout Pass has three double-chair lifts, a rope tow, 34 named runs, and a vertical drop of 1,150 feet.

Adult lift prices are \$42 on weekends and holiday periods and \$39 midweek.



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