

MONEY



Oh, what a wicked month!

Three days of positive gains on the TSX buoyed a painful October, but the main index ended down 16 per cent. November? Here's hoping.

PAGE A42

MAKE SAVE SPEND

CONTACT PAUL LUKE • 604-605-2018 • pluke@theprovince.com | SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 2, 2008

Smithers has 20/20 vision

REDEVELOPMENT: Company sees ski-hill project that won't turn town into a Whistler

BY FRANK LUBA
STAFF REPORTER

A redevelopment of the ski hill in Smithers will provide an economic boost without transforming the B.C. community into the Whistler of the north, proponents say.

A mega-development — like the one in Whistler that will host the 2010 Winter Olympics — is not something that owner Hudson Bay Mountain Adventures plans for Ski and Ride Smithers or that the community would necessarily welcome.

The first part of the opening phase of the ski hill's redevelopment by Hudson Bay owner 20/20 Investments Inc. will see 56 of 148 lots offered for sale Nov. 17.

Lorne Borgal, president of 20/20, said the lots range in size from 8,500 to 20,000 square feet and will start at \$137,500. The lots are designed to be true ski-in, ski-out, as opposed to taking off your gear and walking down a path to your place.

The opening-phase development will cost about \$75 million, Borgal said. The complete master plan for development calls for five times the initial building area.

Borgal, who was president-CEO of Whistler Mountain Corp. from 1983 to 1989, insisted the plans for Smithers are vastly different than that community or similar megaresorts like Kicking Horse in Golden or Revelstoke Mountain Resort.

"Those are really big bets," said Borgal. "That's not the sort of company we run. We're looking for smaller bets in very unique markets. We think Smithers fits within that context."

Smithers, a northwestern B.C. community 1,156 kilometres north of Vancouver, is located between Prince George and Prince Rupert. It's a 12-hour drive from the Lower Mainland but less than two hours away by plane.

Smithers Mayor Jim Davidson is happy the development occurring on the mountain is residential.



Lorne Borgal, president of 20/20, says his company doesn't envisage a Kicking Horse or Revelstoke-type project. 'We're looking for smaller bets in very unique markets. We think Smithers fits within that context.' The opening phase (see artist's impression) will cost about \$75 million.



"If it was commercial, I think that would be more of a concern for the downtown merchants," he said.

"Smithers doesn't really want to be Whistler."

But with an improved airport now able to accommodate jet aircraft, more visitors are expected.

"We certainly would welcome the fly-in, fly-out and people living there and having that component," Davidson said.

But he doesn't want the community turning into a one-industry town.

"We are a very diversified community," Davidson said, pointing to year-round recreation in addition to Smithers' role as a service centre in the Bulkley Valley, its sawmill and mining exploration activities.

That diversification will include more development on and around

the mountain. The ski hill is about 26 kilometres by gravel provincial highway from Smithers. A new ski-out trail has been cut that runs from the bottom of the hill to about a half-kilometre outside of town.

About 45,000 visitors a year use two T-bars and a chairlift to access a vertical of 1,150 metres. Plans for the first phase of the development call for two more chairlifts and a beginner lift.

"It's a big mountain with a very small ski operation," Borgal said.

There are currently 35 runs, with an average snow depth of 135 to 180 centimetres. The average temperature during the ski season is minus-5 Celsius, which means plenty of dry, powdery snow.

"This is Rocky Mountain powder without the rocks," Borgal said.

The master plan at build-out would potentially include nine ski

lifts serving more than 72 trails on about 270 hectares of ski terrain.

Whistler and Blackcomb, which have respective verticals of 1,530 and 1,609 metres, have a total of 38 lifts and 3,307 hectares of ski-able terrain.

Borgal acknowledged the current economic crisis may not be the best time for a real estate development but he is optimistic about his company's slow and deliberate approach.

"In the North, there is no product to compete with this project," he said. "If you live in Williams Lake [and farther] north, this is your only choice for a good mountain recreational product. I think we can come out of this quite well."

Eventually, 20/20 hopes to have a gondola running from downtown Smithers to the mountain as a more environmentally amiable alterna-

tive to driving up to the hill.

But even a modest-capacity gondola, which Borgal said would cost \$10 million to \$12 million, is not part of the current phase of development.

"It's not something a free-enterprise company can do on its own," said Borgal. He thinks a gondola could be built with municipal and provincial help because it would benefit the community as a "pretty phenomenal tourist asset."

In comparison, Whistler has already gone ahead with an even grander gondola tourist attraction. On Dec. 12 it is scheduled to open the \$53-million Peak 2 Peak gondola from the atop Whistler to the top of Blackcomb.

It will be the world's longest free-spanning gondola, at one point going 3.02 km between towers.

fluba@theprovince.com

S&P/TSX ▼ -93.45
9,762.76

DOW ▲ +144.32
9,325.01

TSX Ventures ▲ +35.55
915.30

Nasdaq ▲ +22.43
1,720.95

Dollar ▲ +0.92
83.02¢ US