



A bike park is incompatible with Timberline Lodge

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Guest Columnist

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Built as a public works project during the Great Depression, Timberline Lodge is one of only 16 National Historic Landmarks in Oregon. At 6,000 feet above sea level it's only about 3 miles from the summit of Mount Hood, and it's widely regarded as the finest example of 1930s mountain architecture.

All of Timberline's interior furnishings, decorations and art pieces were designed and created by regional artists and craftspeople. Timberline is a publicly owned building administered by the U.S. Forest Service. The lodge was built in response to the growing number of visitors to the Mount Hood National Forest. There was a growing interest in recreating in the forests and mountains, and skiing was a fast-rising winter sport. From the beginning, the Forest Service leased the lodge and the ski permit area to private concessionaires. For the first approximately 20 years, Timberline had a string of unsuccessful operators, to the point that the Forest Service was considering the permanent removal of the structure.

In the mid-1950s, Richard L. Kohnstamm was awarded the concession, and he is rightly thought of as the Man Who Saved Timberline. For over 50 years, RLK and Company has grown the facility into a premier Northwest ski resort and has lovingly maintained and restored the historic structure through its partnership with the Forest Service and the Friends of Timberline. Today, Timberline Lodge is a world-class all-season destination hotel and resort hosting nearly 2 million visitors a year.

In May 2009, the Forest Service accepted and recognized a new Master Development Plan by RLK and Company for Timberline. In December 2009, RLK submitted an amendment to the plan to specifically recognize mountain biking as a summer activity. In January 2010, RLK submitted a proposed action to the Forest Service for a mountain bike park in the ski permit area that would include a bike-skills park and a network of downhill bike trails that would be serviced by the Jeff Flood Express chairlift.

This month, the Forest Service notified the public of the proposal and started the scoping process to obtain public comment. The announcement of the proposal attracted the attention of many individuals and groups interested in the welfare of the Mount Hood National Forest in general and Timberline Lodge in particular. There's a general

concern that a lift-accessed downhill bike park is incompatible with the experience the public expects when visiting the historic lodge on the windswept alpine mountainside that Oregonians simply call Timberline.

The traditional summer season activities at Timberline have been hiking, climbing, sightseeing, and the unique experience of skiing on Palmer glacier. There is deep concern with the claim made in the proposal that the bike park will be laid out in a way that "avoids the historic Timberline Lodge" so as to "not conflict with the experience of visitors to the lodge."

The lift-assisted downhill biking proposal requires the construction of permanent machine-made trails that are "armored" with rock to prevent soil erosion. The trails would be 3 feet to 6 feet wide. Man-made features would be added to increase the level of difficulty for advanced riders, along with berms for high-speed banked turns. The proposal is for a five-year build-out, which would lead to a network of more than 15 trails throughout the forested slope below the lodge. In addition, the proposal includes a bike-skills play park next to the Wy'East Day Lodge, but sited so as not to be visible from Timberline Lodge.

The proposal does not include an estimate of daily usage. In the winter, Timberline has a daily ski capacity of 3,990, but with only one lift proposed for the bike trails the number of daily riders would be considerably less. The proposal states that there will be a full-time staff to maintain the trails and a bike patrol for safety, first aid and guest hosting.

Those stating their concerns with this proposal are not opposed to mountain biking as a legitimate form of recreation, whether on public or private lands. Lift-accessed bike parks are growing in popularity, and there already is one operating on Mount Hood at Ski Bowl. In addition, plans are being formulated for these parks at other ski areas in Oregon and Washington.

But Timberline doesn't attract nearly 2 million visitors a year because it's just another ski area in Oregon. Timberline is The Place: It is a unique, one-of-a-kind, irreplaceable experience. The iconic image of Timberline Lodge exposed above the tree line on the south slope of Hood is burned into the psyche of Oregonians.

It's greatly feared that this proposal will bring about the following:

Loss of landscape. This proposal would bring about the complete and unnecessary destruction of a fragile sub-alpine landscape composed of thin duff over volcanic ash soil. It is highly doubtful that a bike patrol will be vigilant enough to prevent free riding off the trail system and bringing about what would essentially become an entirely destroyed forest floor.

Loss of forest. The forest at Timberline is late seral, meaning mature and old-growth. Much has already been removed for ski trails. Most of the proposed trail miles to be constructed will be new miles requiring the removal of even more late seral forest.

Loss of habitat. The loss of undisturbed ground and removal of more trees will have a catastrophic effect on the wildlife population of this forest. Portions of late seral forests provide important habitat for the northern spotted owl, an endangered species, as well as other species. As a final insult, the constant presence of speeding bike riders is entirely incompatible with the wildlife currently in residence.

Loss of aesthetic appeal. It is said that every out-of-state relative is taken to Timberline, every Oregonian's mountain home. People have described a visit to Timberline in terms usually reserved for spiritual shrines. The Timberline experience is composed of the historic lodge with a viewscape that includes three Cascade peaks in the distance and Hood looming overhead. Hotel guests and day visitors hike the trails above and below the lodge to experience the views, the meadows, flowers, trees and the sound of the wind. The historic outdoor amphitheater has recently been restored for intimate gatherings to listen to music and other presentations relevant to the place.

What will it mean when the meadows, flowers and trees are turned into a bike park? What will have been lost and what will have been gained?

Ask yourself this: What do nearly 2 million visitors each year come to Timberline to see, to breathe, to feel?

Dennis Chaney of Northeast Portland is a board member of Friends of Mount Hood.

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