

Pay to play on the ski mountain?



By Nick Wolcott

Robert Waggener and Randy Fitzpatrick exit the gondola's St. Sophia station for a mountain bike ride Wednesday. The Forest Service is considering charging user fees for those using trails on the ski area.

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By Patrick Healy, staff writer

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Telluride, Colo. -

Hikers and bikers in Telluride enjoy the rarest of summer services — a free gondola that whisks them to a paradise of free mountaintop hiking and biking. But right now, the U.S. Forest Service is considering whether to charge people to use the trails atop the ski mountain.

The Forest Service says it desperately needs a full-time bike ranger to patrol the mountain, but it doesn't have enough money to fund the \$35,000 position. And it hasn't been able to convince local governments or other major players on the ski mountain to contribute money to create the job.

So now, the Forest Service is chewing over an idea to charge people to hike or bike the now-free trails, although numerous questions remain about such a plan.

There's no formal proposal on the table and no concrete vision that lays out how much hikers or bikers would pay, who would collect the fees, how the rules would be enforced, or whether people would pay by the day or buy season-long passes.

"We haven't tried to figure out what a fee would be," said Judy Schutza, the Forest Service's Norwood District ranger. "We haven't gotten to that level."

But the Forest Service says it needs to do something to end what it calls "chaos" and a "free-for-all" on the summertime ski mountain trails. Most of the ski area and its web of trails sit on national Forest Service land, and the agency takes the lead in managing that terrain during the summer season.

Many of the problems revolve around mountain biking.

For years, the Forest Service has been trying to shut down an underground railroad of illegal downhill trails that users have carved into the woods. Citing growing conflicts between hikers, bikers and Telski vehicles, the agency closed two popular downhill trails to mountain bikes this summer.

And last summer, it was able to hire a full-time bike ranger to talk to bikers, enforce Forest Service regulations and barricade illegal trails. This summer, however, funding dried up, and the bike ranger was only on the mountain two days per week for part of the summer.

It was, Schutza writes in a memo to the Mountain Village Owners Association, "a huge step backward."

Mountain bikers kept zipping down closed routes, hikers and bikers got lost on unsigned and unmarked trails, there were no barriers blocking access to illegal trails, and all sorts of users ducked closure ropes across the ski mountain.

Unlike resorts like Whistler or Vail, which have ticketed, regulated summer operations, summer on Telluride's ski mountain is more do-it-yourself. Anyone can hop on the free gondola and get off at 10,750 feet at the St. Sophia station and head onto the network of trails interlacing the mountain. No one asks you to buy a lift ticket or sign a waiver.

The ski company, the Town of Mountain Village and the Forest Service have long pondered how to manage summer hiking and biking on the mountain.

"The question came up: Could we charge a fee?" Telski CEO Dave Riley said during a Mountain Village Owners Association meeting to discuss recreation on the mountain. "It's just a starting point. Most ski resorts charge a fee, but we're this unique animal because we've got this free gondola."

Before any user fees are set up, TMVOA and the Telluride Tourism Board will survey people on the mountain to gauge their opinions about what they'd like to see on the mountain, and whether they'd be willing to pay to play.

"At this point, what we need to do is a survey and get some feedback back," Schutza said.

But the very notion of charging access fees on public lands is bound to stir some controversy.

"I think there's going to be too much pushback, but there are other ways to generate revenue," said Jonathan Greenspan, a Mountain Village council member. "You don't want to just single out the visitor."

Yesterday morning, we did an informal survey of the hikers and bikers wandering around the gondola station in the September chill. Many bridled at the idea of paying to use the trails.

"It's pretty ridiculous, just with shutting down the trails this summer, and that they'd slap [a fee] down on us," said Niko Cordalis, a mountain biker.

"Try and collect from me, that's what I say," said Robert Waggener, as he straddled a black Specialized mountain bike and waited for his friends to join him for a ride down the Village Trail.

"I wouldn't be for it — if it was a delicate ecosystem, maybe," said Eric Johnson, a former Tellurider who lives in Denver.

"It's expensive enough to come here as a family," said Michelle Hovet. "We spent \$3 on chocolate milk and now they'd want to charge us to come up?"

But Bruce Crane, a first-time visitor to Telluride and one awed by its beauty, said he'd chip in a few bucks to manage the trails.

"If they have to charge a fee to maintain the operation," he said, looking out at Wilson Peak, "by all means."

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Really, exploring options to expand the mountain in the summer is a good idea even if fees are involved. In Europe, lifts run in the summer up to mountainside restaurants. This could work very well for the new restaurant planned for the top of lift 5. We really need to get some new activities going on in the summer, and some attention being paid to this is a good start.

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When they shut down the trails to mountain biking, it was pretty clear this was where they're going with this.

What's changed since '96 (or whenever the gondola came on line)? Sure there are more people visiting, but not exponential numbers. The fact of the matter is simple: Dave Riley is now here. I don't judge the man, but his actions are divisive in many ways & he seems to have a knack of 'manufacturing crisis' to suit his agenda ... even if it means just giving him more control for its own sake.

Remember lift 9 and how the sky would fall down upon us all unless we delayed its opening? Gondola operator's wages are too high? Lifties & instructors who stick it out through the entire season (through below zero weather and blizzards) will not be entitled a bonus? Now a 20% increase in season pass price, accompanied by lower capacity on lift 9! In many observer's eyes, he has been WAY OFF BASE on all of the above why is it any different now re: pay-per-use?!?

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I would not support a pay-per-use on the existing trails, but would be for it if there were more and better trails available including Down Hill specific trails. Telluride is already an expensive place to visit, I don't agree with putting a barrier in place for visitors and locals alike to access our public lands and trails that were built with federal money.

In order for the pay-per-use to work, we need to have one of the entities mainly Telski or TMVOA take responsibility for the trail networks. Please step up to the plate Telski. If we had a real mountain bike park with downhill trails and more cross country trails we would attract people from Moab, Grand Junction, Durango, Fruita (effectively the entire western slope and more) if we did it. Otherwise we can be re-active and someone else will beat us to the punch and garner the large market share that is sitting out there for the taking. Don't forget that people that visit in the summer and enjoy it will most likely come back in the winter, which will help the local economy and Telski's bottom line.

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