



**EARNED TURNS:** RICH BANACH GETS INTO THE GOODS IN KODI BOWL ON THE EAST FACE OF BRECKENRIDGE'S PEAK 6

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## Pushing the Boundaries

Breckenridge is primed to open new terrain on Peak 6. While the expansion has some locals excited, many see it as a big corporation's move too far.

By Jayme Moye

During his more than 30 years living in Breckenridge, city council member Jeffrey Bergeron has explored plenty of terrain in the Ten Mile Range. Like most long-term residents of mountain towns, he spends a lot of time outdoors. Nature, the environment, these are the things that sustain him. And of course, skiing. But suddenly, Bergeron has found his two life passions at odds.

Since a proposed resort expansion project heated up this spring, Bergeron, along with other Breck stakeholders, has been grappling with tough questions concerning development. Installing a new lift means clearing trees, but more terrain means shorter lift lines and a less crowded mountain. Where do you draw the line between opening up a mountain for more skiing and protecting its wild places?

The debate has pitted Breckenridge parent company Vail Resorts against environmentalists and some locals, who fear an unsustainable influx of tourists into town. The U.S. Forest Service, which manages the public lands leased by Vail Resorts, will make the final decision.

"I believe that everyone involved is truly committed to this mountain and this community," said Bergeron. "The challenge is that there are some drastically dissenting opinions and

conflicting agendas among the various groups."

## THIN THE CROWDS

The area under scrutiny is Peak 6, an untouched section of sidecountry adjacent to Breckenridge's four other developed mountains. Vail Resorts' proposal would build a six-person lift on the peak, opening up an additional 550 acres of lift-served and hike-to terrain. The expansion includes building a 150-person lodge and a warming hut for ski patrol.

The land in contention is within the resort's existing permit of 5,700 acres, of which 3,100 are currently in operation. The expansion is critical, according to Vail Resorts, and that's an opinion supported by many Coloradoans. Breckenridge Resort has measured its comfortable carrying capacity at 14,920 guests per day. Yet, during peak season, the resort sees more than 16,000 skiers 25 percent of the time. This equates to overcrowding just about every weekend. The expansion project would increase the daily comfortable carrying capacity to 16,020.

"Peak 6 is the most important project we can undertake at Breckenridge to enhance the on-mountain guest experience by adding a significant amount of terrain and lift capacity for intermediate skiers," said Kristen Pettit Stewart, Senior Communications Manager at Breckenridge Resort.

Breckenridge is the most popular resort in the U.S., with 1.6 million visitors per year. Six other Colorado resorts receive upwards of 1 million guests each year, but they're all larger than Breckenridge, so the skiers are more spread out on the mountain.

"On powder days, Breck is a mess," said

Jared Mazlish, owner of Fat-ypus skis and 22-year resident. "Everyone's fighting to get up above the treeline, and the liftlines start to feel like big city traffic jams." Mazlish feels the expansion is necessary and that growth is inevitable at a successful resort. "It's best planned for, not fought against," he said.

## THIN THE TREES?

Expansion, no matter how justified, raises a red flag with most environmentalists and the Breckenridge community is particularly sensitive, especially since Summit County was hit hard by the mountain pine beetle epidemic. Some experts estimate that when all is said and done, Breck will have lost 90- to 95-percent of its Lodgepole pine trees to beetle kill. "It's hard to be okay with clearing 70 acres of healthy spruce and fir on Peak 6 when we're losing so many pine trees involuntarily," Bergeron said.

He and wife Ellen Hollinshead initiated the Breck Open Space Fund fifteen years ago (the town has since purchased more than 18,000 acres for conservation and preservation). The pair claims loss of animal habitat is a major concern of the expansion project. Canadian lynx, previously extinct in Colorado, and reintroduced in 1999, have been spotted in Summit Country adjacent to the ski area. And while experts have contested whether those cats are "transient" and just moving through, or sticking around as "residents," Hollinshead argues that, either way, clearing out 61 football fields worth of trees on Peak 6 isn't going to help them survive.

The Forest Service requested an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) to help guide its decision, which was commissioned by Vail Resorts. The first draft was published in 2008, followed by a revision this past June. A public 45-day comment period followed. During that time, residents voiced their environmental concerns about the mountain and fears that the expansion would draw even more tourists to a town already overtaxed during peak season.

"There's already about 20 days in the season when the town is just maxed out," said resident PJ Perrinjaquet, MD, a family physician and the president of High Country Health Care. "The restaurants are full, all the lodging is booked and the traffic is terrible." Unfortunately, increasing carrying capacity on the mountain doesn't increase the city of Breckenridge's ability to house and feed guests.

## SAME STORY, DIFFERENT MOUNTAIN

The polarizing debate over on-mountain development that has been antagonizing the normally laid-back mountain town of Breckenridge is not a new conundrum. Nor is the issue cut-and-dry, as outcomes from other expansion proposals have differed drastically from one mountain to the next.

In Crested Butte in 2009, the U.S. Forest Service denied the resort's proposal to expand to nearby Snodgrass Mountain. It was the first time the agency outright denied a Colorado ski resort's request for expansion. Proponents hoped that creating more intermediate runs

A lot of the opposition is from people who've been here for quite a while. A lot of the support is from the more newly arrived, who think of it as only a terrain expansion and aren't as concerned with the environmental impact.

—Jeffrey Bergeron



**THE LAND BEYOND:** CRYSTAL PEAK LOOMS IN THE BACKGROUND AS SKIERS TRAVERSE PEAK 6 INTO THE MORE COMMITTING LINES OF THE INSIDE CORNER AND NORTH CHUTE IN THE BRECKENRIDGE BACKCOUNTRY.

would turn around Crested Butte’s declining visitor numbers. Opponents, led by the Friends of Snodgrass Mountain, which was formed to thwart development plans, said expansion on the mountain didn’t equate to a better quality of life in the community, citing environmental concerns as their primary objection.

Those against the expansion were so vocal that the Forest Service nixed the proposal without even requiring an environmental review.

In Montana, the opposite occurred in 2008. Bridger Bowl’s plans to build a lift that would open up 311 acres of expert skiing and riding terrain in a backcountry area known as Slushman’s were incredibly well-received. Locals saw it as a way to get faster, safer access to the above-treeline terrain they craved on big powder days. And the truly hardcore just go farther out since the new lift drops skiers off at glide level to the ridgeline for a quick hike up to the wild terrain on Saddle Peak.

“People were just as excited about the expansion then as they are now—they absolutely love it, and ski the snot out of it,” said Bozeman resident Chris Ennis.

The community’s warm reception came from a consensus that Bridger Bowl was in desperate need of more advanced terrain. The resort had not expanded in 30 years, but the locals’ skill sets had. Plus, there is no resort town and lodging industry at the base of Bridger Bowl (Bozeman is the nearest, 16 miles away), so locals didn’t share Breck residents’ concerns about flooding an already tapped out town with more visitors drawn by the expansion.

Also unlike Breck, Bridger Bowl is a non-profit. “We expand because we need to expand, not because there are any hidden agendas over profit,” said Douglas Wales, the resort’s sales and marketing director.

## HIDDEN AGENDAS AND HOPE

Hidden agendas, and some not-so-hidden, are a big part of the contention in Breckenridge. Some proponents have accused so-called

environmentalists of overdramatizing the green impact in order to promote their real objective: the selfish preservation of their sacred sidecountry—terrain, including a sweet bowl, that would be turned into groomers if Peak 6 were developed. At the same time, some opponents suspect that the resort has its eye on the dollar more than the skier experience, claiming that above-treeline terrain expansion on Peak 6 wouldn’t really serve intermediate skiers, as the resort claims, since those types of skiers aren’t used to the extreme conditions at that elevation, like high winds and freezing temperatures. But it would serve to increase real estate value at the mammoth resort-invested properties over on that side of the ski area.

Despite infighting, there’s still hope for a happy ending, or at least a compromise. An alternative to the Peak 6 expansion was proposed following the first draft of the EIS and is currently being considered alongside the original by

the Forest Service. Known as “Alternative 3” (Alternative 1 is to do nothing, and Alternative 2 is the original proposal), or “Peak 6 Light,” the plan looks to increase comfortable carrying capacity by making improvements to the existing lifts and trail systems, and proposes a more limited expansion—97 acres north of Peak 7 in an area dubbed Peak 6-and-½, to be accessed by a new four- or six-person chairlift that stays beneath the treeline.

“This accomplishes all the same visitor experience enhancements that Vail Resorts was hoping for, and then some, considering that it keeps to true intermediate terrain,” said Hollinshead.

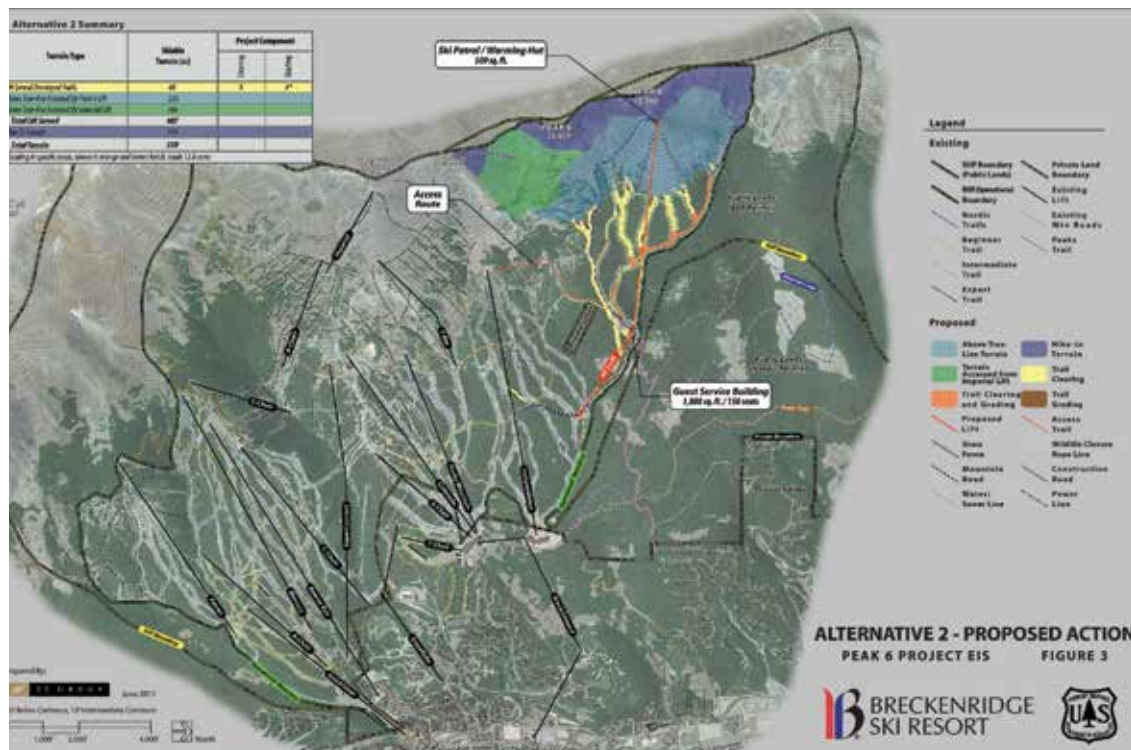
Breckenridge’s Stewart said Vail Resorts is confident that Peak 6 will be a welcome addition, but can’t yet speak to the feasibility of that addition or to the reception of Peak 6 Light. “At this point, it is all dependent on the final EIS and the Forest Service’s decision. And we don’t know how long that will take.”

Meanwhile, some locals, particularly small business owners like Mazlish, think that everyone may be missing the point. The bigger issue is Vail Resorts’ management of the mountain, he argues. He feels a lot of the concern regarding overcrowding and expansion stems from mismanagement, particularly surrounding the 2005 expansion in response to demand for better access to groomed bowl skiing above the treeline (sound familiar?).

“They put in the Imperial Lift, but when that lift doesn’t open until 10:30 a.m. because Vail Resorts doesn’t want to pay avalanche control overtime to get in early on a powder morning, lift lines are going to get backed up,” he says. Building a new chair to a new bowl on a new peak isn’t going to fix that process glitch. “It’s just a Band-Aid.”

In the meantime, Peak 6 is open right now, as long as you want to skin up there with locals like Jeffrey Bergeron. •

*Jayme Moye is the managing editor of Elevation Outdoors.*



**WHAT DEMOCRACY LOOKS LIKE?:** TAKE A LOOK AT “ALTERNATIVE 2” FOR PEAK 6 EXPANSION.