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Feb. 07, 2008
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Resort unveils expansion plan for Lee Canyon area

By KEITH ROGERS
REVIEW-JOURNAL

Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort delivered an ambitious plan to local U.S. Forest Service officials Wednesday that calls for building more lifts, a new lodge, adding a groomed tubing area and increasing the number of ski runs to 51 in Mount Charleston's Lee Canyon.

If approved and implemented, the two-phase, master development plan would span 10 years and result in "tens of millions of dollars" of improvements to the ski area, said Brian Strait, the resort's president and general manager.

"We're committed to improving the ski area while improving the situation for sensitive species," he said.

The resort, owned by a partnership of the Thomas & Mack Co. and Powdr Corp. of Park City, Utah, holds a special-use permit from the Forest Service to operate the ski and snowboard area on 700 acres in Lee Canyon. The 40-year permit will be up for renewal in 2043.

Currently, the resort operates four chairlifts that haul skiers and snow boarders to 11 trails. The plan calls for removing all but lift No. 1 and building eight more during the first phase and adding three more in the second phase, bringing the total number of lifts to 12.

The number of trails would increase to 30 in the first phase with 21 added in the second phase.

In addition, Strait said, "We propose to develop a snow-sliding inner tube area ... with restroom facilities and trash facilities and a staff to direct how to enjoy safe recreation on the mountain.

"It will be void of stumps and hazards, and managed to a level where those types of incidences won't occur," he said.

He was referring to at least one fatality and many serious injuries among sledding enthusiasts who have flocked to unsupervised areas of the mountain and have crashed into rocks and trees in the past two winters.

"We're talking about a maintained area," Strait said. "It will be groomed and there will be transportation to go back up and do it again. It has broad appeal to a lot of people who just want to come up and enjoy the snow."

Stephanie Phillips, deputy forest supervisor for the Humboldt-Toiyabe National Forest which includes the Spring Mountains, said at first glance the plan "appears to be well done with lots of good information, good maps and pictures and very innovative ideas for both winter and summertime recreational activities.

"We'll be working closely with the Las Vegas Ski and Snowboard Resort and with other entities like the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service," Phillips said.

She said the Forest Service will determine if the plan encompasses "appropriate activities for Forest Service lands."

An environmental assessment of potential impacts will be made available for public review, Phillips said.

Of particular concern is the rare Mount Charleston blue butterfly. Scientists are worried that the fragile population of the tiny butterfly with dull, iridescent blue wings might be sliding toward extinction. Only a few of them were last seen in 2005 by an expert who monitors the population at two undisclosed locations on the mountain, 25 miles northwest of Las Vegas.

Strait said the resort's expansion will benefit habitat for the butterfly's host plant, Torrey's milkvetch.

Craig Baldwin, the resort's base operations manager, said the ski area's staff is committed to practicing the best environmental management. "We are good stewards of the land and we're going to do nothing but improve on that," he said.

The plan also offers a potential solution to another problem the Forest Service faces on the mountain: the danger posed by wildfires.

The resort currently fills a 1-million-gallon reservoir to use for making snow at the beginning of the ski season and during the season when needed. The proposal calls for expanding that reservoir to hold 8 million gallons and building a second one with a capacity for 25 million gallons to 28 million gallons.

"It's not like that water is disappearing. It's going right back into the watershed," Baldwin said, noting that agencies that fight fires will have access to the reservoirs for filling helicopter buckets.

To handle increased crowds from the expansion, Baldwin envisions shuttle buses that will carry skiers from a \$1 million parking lot about five miles below the slopes at the 6,000-foot elevation at the entrance to Lee Canyon.

The resort has also been approved for a federal grant to run multiple bus operations to the ski area from the northwest Las Vegas Valley.

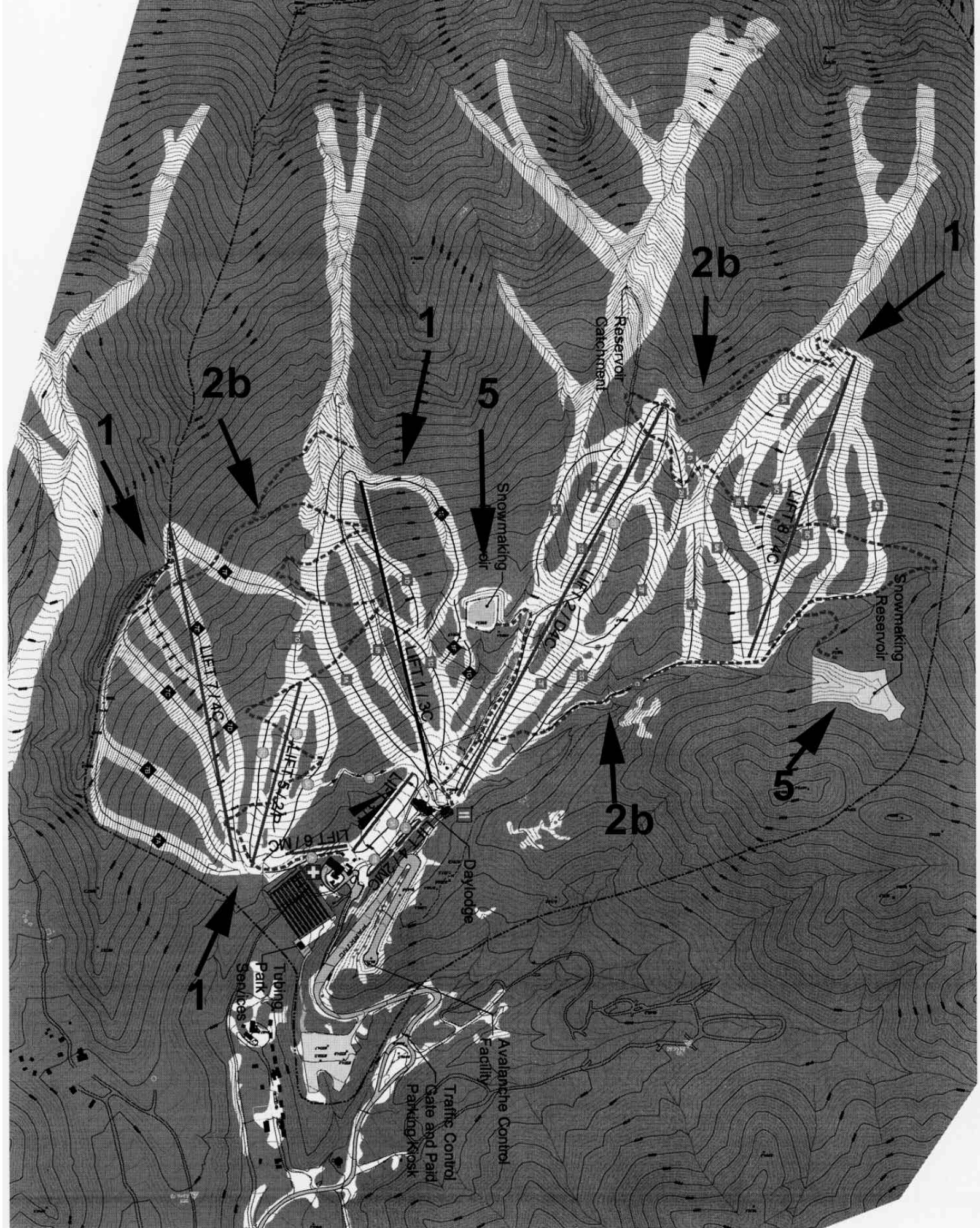
If implemented, the plan would make the resort a summer destination as well where visitors could ride lifts up the mountain and dine at the lodge. There are currently two lodge structures that were built in the 1960s. Those would be torn down and replaced with a 50,000-square foot facility.

"With temperatures up there 30 to 35 degrees cooler on a summer day, this would be a great option to get out of the heat," Strait said.

The public can view the draft master plan and offer feedback in about a week when it will be posted on the resort's Web site.

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