

Kirkwood in no hurry to be more than it is

By Jessie Marchesseau

KIRKWOOD – When Vail Resorts bought Kirkwood in April 2012, the company did not get *all* of Kirkwood. What the Colorado-based company bought were the rights to run the actual ski resort, the associated restaurants and retail, and the overnight lodging. Kirkwood Mountain Development retained all real estate development rights.

What this means for Kirkwood is there is one entity, Vail Resorts, completely focused on improving the skiing experience. While the other one, Kirkwood Mountain Development, is completely focused on the real estate side of things. If each of these entities can allocate 100 percent of its time and money to its respective area of expertise, Kirkwood, in theory, should reap the benefits.



This is a rendering of Expedition Lodge, the project in the center of the village at base of Chair 11.

With April being the one-year anniversary of Vail's involvement with Kirkwood, here are a few highlights of what changes The Wood has seen so far, and what is coming up from

both sides.

In real estate

This season, Kirkwood has seen an upswing in real estate that nearly rivals 2006. The average transaction price is up more than 35 percent from last season. Nate Whaley, managing broker for Kirkwood Mountain Realty and president of Kirkwood Resort Development, said he is seeing an increase in real estate demand especially in the high-end. Two \$1 million-plus homes have sold this year, one of them the fourth highest sale in Kirkwood history.

Whaley attributes this partly to improvements in the economy as a whole, and partly to people seeing the success of other Vail resorts such as Northstar and its nearby Martis Camp development. Buyers see an opportunity to own at what is already a great mountain, and, under Vail's direction, stands to become a world-class resort.

So is Kirkwood going to turn into another Northstar?

"No," Whaley tells *Lake Tahoe News*. "Kirkwood is a very different experience from Northstar. The mountain is very different, and the village experience is very different. It will always be a much more intimate village than Northstar."

This increased demand is not driving any immediate real estate development either. KMD has had a Mountain Master Development Plan in place for years, including a complete redevelopment of the Red Cliffs area and the new Expedition Lodge at the base of Chair 11. However, they have few building plans in the very near future. Currently, just one project is in the pipeline that could start as early as the end of this summer or summer 2014.

What that project is, well, they aren't saying at this time.

Regardless of Vail's involvement, Kirkwood will still max out

at 1,400 residential units, about half of which are already built. That number was reaffirmed in 2003, but was set long before then. All of the remaining development at Kirkwood will be what Whaley calls "right in Times Square," meaning it will be ski in, ski out slated for the base of the mountain.

As far as commercial development, a lot of skiers are anticipating the "tent" at Timber Creek coming down and a more permanent structure taking its place. This is entirely up to Vail, as they own the development rights for that area. However, there are currently no plans for that happening. Many assume the empty foundation sitting next door to the temporary building is the unfinished attempt at a lodge. In reality, that foundation is the beginning of 67-unit condominium project by a private developer.

Real estate in a place like Kirkwood is closely tied to mountain operations. If a new lodge goes in at Timber Creek, chances are, residences will too.

On the mountain

Vail Resorts recently announced it would be spending a record amount of money on ski resort improvements for the 2013-14 season: \$140 million across all of its resorts. How much of that money is Kirkwood getting? They won't say.

What they will say is Kirkwood will not be seeing any new chairlifts or new lodges just yet. Kirkwood Vice President and General Manager Casey Blann said Vail is still feeling Kirkwood out, learning how the mountain works and what it needs. A few things were obvious right off the bat: snow safety, customer service, food and bathrooms.

These four items received most of the attention this last year and will continue to eat up most of the capital improvement dollars for next season. These types of changes are not as sexy as new chairlifts, and new visitors may not even notice the changes, but long-time passholders will, and have.

“It’s been fun to have those folks that were fearful and turn them into supporters,” Blann told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Time and again Kirkwood locals noted the lifts opening on time this year, even on storm days. They also noticed shorter lift lines and more on-mountain security.

“There were less crowds,” commented Doug Severn, who has been skiing and driving a snowcat at Kirkwood for more than a decade, “but that’s not good either. They scared everybody away!”

The two security guards at the bottom of Chair 6 on closing day did look like they might arrest someone at any moment.

Snow safety, on the other hand, is less visible to the public. A new avalanche bomb launching device makes shooting the bombs faster and more accurate, allowing ski patrol to open areas for skiing quicker on storm days. Also helping chairlifts open earlier will be the new patrol shack/snowcat garage at the top of Chair 10.

While this may not seem important to the average skier, Severn calls this plan “brilliant.”

“It’s one of the best things Kirkwood could do for itself. The reason they can’t get 10 open is they don’t have a working cat up there,” he said.

Currently, Blann explained, during storm cycles, a ski patroller will spend the night in the patrol shack at the top of Chair 10, getting up every few hours to start up the snow cat and clear the snow away from the top of the lift. The problem is, the cat gets frozen, full of snow and breaks down. If the top of the chair is not clear, other patrollers cannot get up there in the morning to start snow safety measures. A working cat equals an open Chair 10.

In addition to the new structure at the top of 10 for next

season, Vail will be putting in a new bar in the Mountain Club plaza, adding more bathrooms, increasing food and beverage options, and expanding the Expedition Kirkwood program with a new snowcat for backcountry tours.

When asked what changes they would like to see for next season, Kirkwood skiers requested everything from new chairlifts and the opening of the Cirque to cheaper food and paved parking lots.

For South Lake Tahoe resident and Kirkwood skier and snowskater Ryan Palmer, the answer is simple: "Doughnuts."

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This is a map from 2007 that has some of Kirkwood's future plans on it, though some of the items are already in the ground.