

Bolton's Bailout: Skiers rally to buy backcountry land

Contributed by James Dillon

Bolton Valley Resort's 5,000 acres of wild backcountry land sit waiting for skiers to break trail and carve turns. But last winter, the resort's developers put more than 1,000 acres of their land on the market. With the threat of development and restricted access looming, it's a race to raise enough money to buy the land and preserve its twisting canvas of backcountry terrain.

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Bolton Valley Resort sits quietly, nestled in the verdant rolling hills of Vermont, its chairlifts spinning and 5,000 acres of wild backcountry land waiting for skiers to break trail and carve turns. Ribbons of trails, meandering streambeds and open birch glades offer backcountry skiers endless options in quiet solitude. But last winter, the resort's developers put more than 1,000 acres of their land on the market, threatening skier access to the backcountry and opening the possibility for development. Now, it's a race to raise enough money to buy the land and preserve its twisting canvas of backcountry terrain.

Bolton Valley is situated between 20,000-acre Camel's Hump State Park to the south and 34,000-acre Mount Mansfield State Forest to the north. The resort offers 70 alpine trails, more than 100 km of Nordic ski access and several entry points to some of Vermont's most untraveled backcountry. With its high elevation, the Nordic Center and backcountry terrain receive more than 300 inches of snowfall annually. The Catamount Trail, a ski trail that runs the length of the state, also stretches through the land, primarily along the popular 9.4-mile Bolton to Trapps Trail.

"It's unique, there's nothing like it," explains Rob Dasaro, manager of the Bolton Valley Nordic Center. "You can go ski the backcountry anywhere, but here the lines are manicured a little, and the Nordic Center gives you a place to put your boots on and get a cup of coffee." This aspect of the backcountry experience draws in a tight community of skiers, says Dasaro, and that group helps maintain the land in the off season and enjoys the abundant trails, glades and drainages when the snow falls.

Over half of Vermont's entire population lives within 30 miles of the land area as well, making it a convenient destination for outdoor enthusiasts. "A lot of people in Vermont use this land as their playground and there's continued access, which is important," says Elise Annes, Vice President for Community Relations at the Vermont Land Trust (VLT).

During February 2011, Redstone, the commercial real estate developer that owns Bolton Valley, put 1,161 acres of Nordic and backcountry terrain on the market and attracted interest from an unidentified private buyer. The resort and its alpine trails are not threatened by the sale. A majority of the Nordic trails and backcountry access, however, would be lost in the transaction and many Nordic trails were closed last winter because of the pending sale. Several stakeholders, including VLT, have speculated that if the land were to fall into the hands of a private buyer, it would be closed to skiing and a large-scale development or dozens of homes could be constructed.

But a group of individuals has banded together to form Friends of Bolton Valley Nordic and Backcountry (FOBVNB) in order to protect the land. "We are a group of people with a long history of dedication to working, hiking and skiing in this beautiful niche of Vermont forest land," said Ann Gotham, coordinator of FOBVNB, in a statement. "Our intent is to conserve the parcel of land being sold by Bolton Valley and its investors while maintaining access to public use," she added.

FOBVNB, now numbering more than 200, send some sixty heartfelt testimonials to the interested buyer explaining individuals' personal connection to the land and its importance to the Bolton Valley community and the state of Vermont. Due in part to FOBVNB's objection, the buyer backed away and the land did not sell. Instead, VLT took

interest and on March 23, 2012, Bolton Valley announced that VLT had signed a contract with resort officials to purchase the land.

Over the next 14 months, FOBVNB, VLT and other concerned parties will campaign to collect the money needed to purchase the land—a total of \$1,850,000. The Vermont Land Trust plans to approach the Vermont Housing and Conservation Board for a grant contribution of \$800,000. The remaining \$1,050,000 will come from public donations and local fundraising. “Our \$1,050,000 fundraising goal is a large amount of money to raise in almost any context,” says Annes, “so it will be a challenging effort. We will need a very broad base of support and we will need those who love this land...to stretch themselves in supporting this project.”

According to Annes, this is one of the largest fundraising efforts VLT has taken on. Other campaigns of similar magnitude have been successful in the past, however, and she is confident that the community connected to Bolton Valley’s Nordic and backcountry terrain will demonstrate their support.

If the fundraising effort is successful and the land is purchased, it will become a part of the Mount Mansfield State Forest and will be accessible to the public for hiking, snowshoeing and skiing, and the Nordic Center will continue operation. “We have a once in a lifetime opportunity to protect this land and we would love for people to realize what is important to them and take this opportunity to protect the legacy of this land,” says Annes.

If VLT does not meet its fundraising goal, the land will still be up for sale and could sell to another private party. If this were to happen, the threat of restricted access and development will loom large again.

But Rob Dasaro is confident that backcountry and Nordic skiers will band together and the fundraising effort will be successful. “Bolton has already sold passes for next year,” he says: “We have every intention to groom the [Nordic] trails and have awesome skiing next year.”

For more information or to make a donation visit the Vermont Land Trust website at vlt.org.

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