

POWDERFEATURE

TS



BRETT SCHRECKENGOST

THE FUTURE OF SKI RESOR

HOW REAL ESTATE, CORPORATE PLANNING AND THE ALMIGHTY SNOWFLAKE ARE CHANGING THE MOUNTAINS WE SKI

"OUR PROGRAM BASICALLY WAS TO DRIVE THE REAL ESTATE GOONS COMPLETELY OUT OF THE VALLEY TO PREVENT THE STATE HIGHWAY DEPARTMENT FROM BRINGING A FOUR-LANE HIGHWAY INTO THE TOWN, AND IN FACT TO BAN ALL AUTO TRAFFIC FROM EVERY DOWNTOWN STREET. TURN THEM ALL INTO GRASSY MALLS WHERE EVERYBODY, EVEN FREAKS, COULD DO WHATEVER'S RIGHT. THE COPS WOULD BECOME TRASH COLLECTORS AND MAINTENANCE MEN FOR A FLEET OF MUNICIPAL BICYCLES, FOR ANYBODY TO USE. NO MORE HUGE SPACE-KILLING APARTMENT BUILDINGS TO BLOCK THE VIEW, FROM ANY DOWNTOWN STREET, OF ANYBODY WHO MIGHT WANT TO LOOK UP AND SEE THE MOUNTAINS. NO MORE LAND-RAPES, NO MORE BUSTS FOR 'FLUTE PLAYING' OR 'BLOCKING THE SIDEWALK'... F*CK THE TOURISTS, DEAD-END THE HIGHWAY, ZONE THE GREEDHEADS OUT OF EXISTENCE, AND IN GENERAL CREATE A TOWN WHERE PEOPLE COULD LIVE LIKE HUMAN BEINGS, INSTEAD OF SLAVES TO SOME BOGUS SENSE OF PROGRESS THAT IS DRIVING US ALL MAD..." —**HUNTER S. THOMPSON, "THE BATTLE OF ASPEN," ROLLING STONE, OCTOBER 1, 1970**

STORY BY DAN KOSTRZEWSKI PHOTOS BY GRANT GUNDERSON

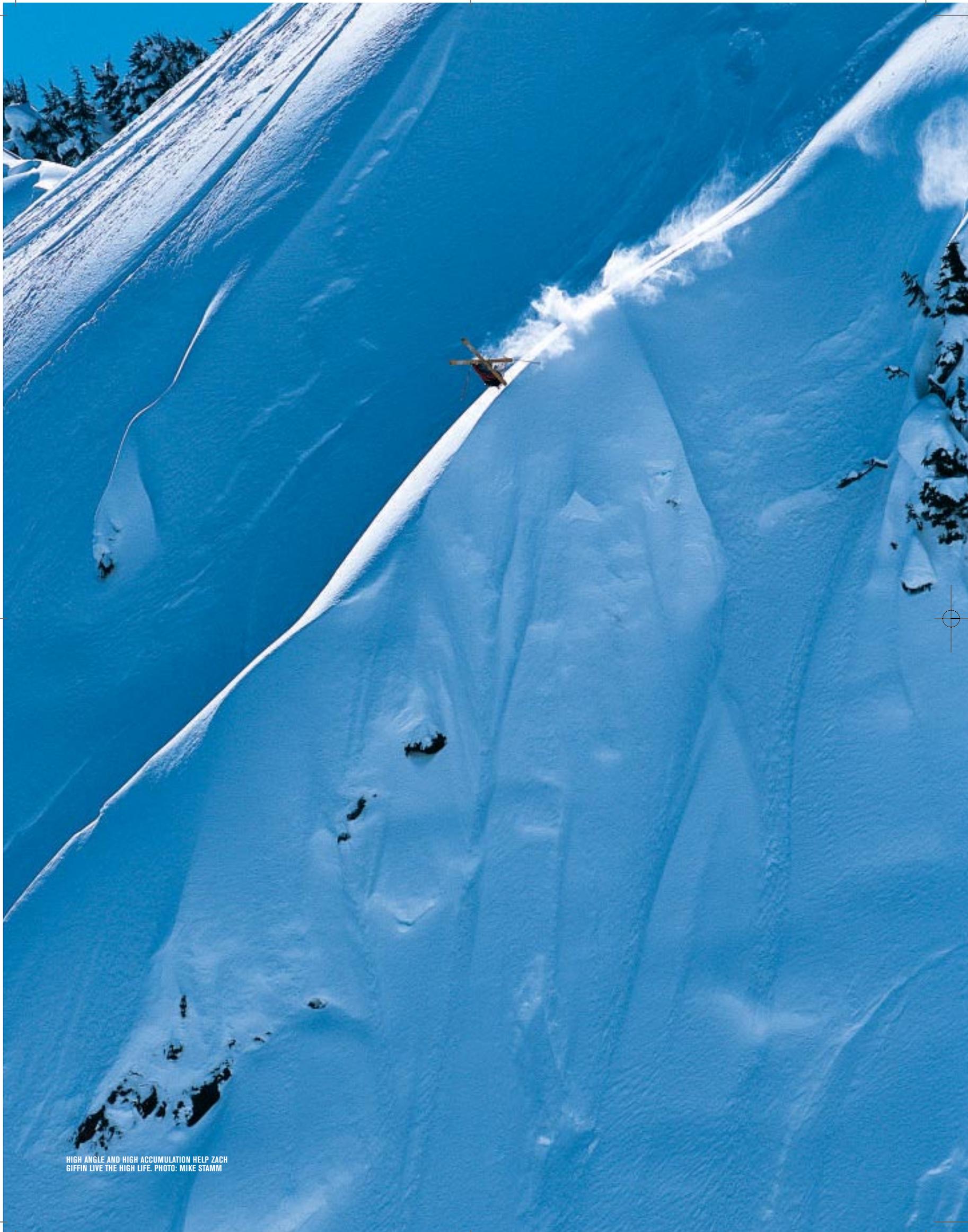
MOUNT BAKER IS THE LAST OF A DYING BREED OF PURE SKI AREAS. AND ITS GENERAL

B E S

T H E L A S T

MANAGER, DUNCAN HOWAT, MIGHT HAVE THE ANSWER TO SAVING THE REST

O R B T



HIGH ANGLE AND HIGH ACCUMULATION HELP ZACH GIFFIN LIVE THE HIGH LIFE. PHOTO: MIKE STAMM

A STIFF SHUKSAN ARM.



The pendulum had swung, but Baker sat silent. January hit hard with 117 inches in five days,

burying even the snowfall gauge. Overhead ecstasy and agonizing tragedy arrived in tandem, with one person suffocating in a tree well and another in a deep hole created by a not-yet-frozen waterfall. With three more feet predicted from the next front and an on-hill community still reeling from the deaths, an area routinely comfortable with two-inch-an-hour accumulation needed to come up for air. General Manager Duncan Howat made the call to shutter the area for five days to dig out. Impatient skiers questioned a full closure, but for Howat, caution took priority over ticket sales. As he relayed in person to our skinning foursome on that eerie Sunday, it was because this storm had behaved unlike any he'd ever seen.

Howat is recognizable by face, name and presence by anyone intimate with this North Cascadian enclave. From atop his trademark silver-and-black Arctic Cat, the mountain's longtime patriarch orchestrates his operation with a rare, immersive approach. Reviewing conditions with the patrol, charting out off-season upgrades, restarting a stalled chair, pulling passes from reckless skiers, and test-driving a futuristic Pisten Bully all fit on his tick list. He's been sighted discussing predawn game plans in the E-lodge, mingling with pass-holding families in the barbecue garden, and hoisting one with Tap Room regulars—all in the same day.

Most locals have a tale to tell about Howat. Some are tame, like helping a snow bunny collect herself after a brutal yard sale. Others, like the skiers who stole a closed sign and were forced to race the 62-year-old up Pan Dome in a failed attempt to keep their passes, seem embellished until confirmed. The earli-

er stories hover between legend and fiction, like a hell-assisted poker game on Mount Baker's summit or nighttime sled missions with shareholders. Yet

as the father of Baker's family tree. And, from the perspective of skiers who suffer the plague of contrived base villages and fractional-ownership condos, may be just the man who discovered a cure for the ailing American ski industry.



"I don't adhere to the idea of 'build it and they will come!' You have to be very careful about balancing your capacity. A lot of these guys throw in detachable high-speed lifts—yeah, the lift line might be short, but now you can't ski the run because it is so crowded. We balance [uphill capacity] with the amount of terrain we have, with the parking, with the restrooms, with the lodge space. Keeping all of that in balance. We could try to make more money and build more parking and then jam that up and crowd the lifts up and go that way, but then the day lodges become unbearable. I think we are in a good balance right now."



The final tally for January's 30-day storm cycle registered a dreamlike 294 inches. After weathering the turbulence of a 23-foot month, Baker's cast and crew reemerged to embrace the second half of a memorable 800-inch winter. The snowfall brought smug smiles back to the faces of the faithful, but didn't come close to the world record of 95 measured feet that piled up during '98-'99. Local lore about "The Big Year" circulates freely, but an average of 647 inches annually proves that even down years at Baker are deep. The geographic reason for this predictable bounty is the ski area's location—shouldered on a spine between the pinnacle of Mount Shuksan and the massif of Mount Baker. Owing either to luck or foresight, this fortunate notch hits the perfect trifecta of orographic lift, angry coastal storms and a sweet spot in their track.

Howat's most lasting legacy is the area itself, and his four-decade influence is deeply felt in the soul of what Baker has become. He is universally respected

Snow is only half of Baker's story. The area's high-angle terrain mixes perfectly with massive accumulation. Tight, fast lines are packed into every sec-



DUNCAN IS UNIVERSALLY RESPECTED AS THE FATHER OF BAKER'S FAMILY TREE. AND, FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF SKIERS WHO SUFFER THE PLAGUE OF CONTRIVED BASE VILLAGES AND FRACTIONAL-OWNERSHIP CONDOS, MAY JUST BE THE MAN WHO DISCOVERED A CURE FOR THE AILING AMERICAN SKI INDUSTRY.



tor of the trail map. From full-throttle pitches on Gabl's and Pan Face to treasured nooks like Hairy Scary, Chicken Ridge and Sticky Trees, the compact acreage holds shot after shot of adrenaline. Nothing short of a homegrown tour will make known the pro-stock terrain found when lining up Gunsights, shimmying through the Willows, or rolling blind into Elf Chutes. But beware, because billy goat zones are left open at-your-own-risk thanks to an organizational mantra that leaves responsibility to skiers. At the gates, a backcountry policy mandating beacon, shovel, probe, partner and snow safety knowledge unlocks sustained picture-perfect lines on Shuksan Arm, Hemispheres and Table Mountain.

"I was 24 years old when I came in, and basically I took over operation of the ski area because that was it, there was no one else. And, over the years, without any big corporation putting money into it—it's been more of a community effort—all of the development

has been paid for by the skiers and snowboarders. It's strictly been done with what we had to work with."

In an era when ski area slopes are remotely owned or heavily leveraged in an effort to keep pace, Baker has stayed its course due to financial discipline. The area is owned by a tight-knit group of shareholders, and the same local family has held the largest percentage for almost four decades. Howat and his family even own a piece of the area and Baker has kept this structure intact since it holds no long-term debt. The resort consistently pays an annual dividend, which keeps the behind-the-scenes owners content. Management weighs big-ticket items carefully, this year selling an idling winch cat to free-up funds for a new Park Bully. They also prioritize on-hand cash for projects that best improve the overall skiing experience. These tactics have saved the mountain from having to squeeze their patrons for every last dollar and, as a result, Baker has

patiently grown its base instead of pricing entire demographics off the slopes.

"Being remote focused us to be careful about how we approached the people and the market compared to other ski areas. We found the uniqueness of Baker and just stayed with that, and it has really worked."

High alpine isolation, a serpentine access road and an unyielding wilderness area boundary have all played a role in keeping growth slow and smart, but a philosophy favoring the rugged and rustic—and a repugnance of the shopping-mall model—has always been part of the long-term plan. A slow-burn transformation that, under Howat's lead, has added six lifts, two new lodges, modernized on-hill infrastructure, stomped out a second base-area footprint, and swapped four antiquated double chairs for fixed-grip slow-speed quads—has updated the area without forcing it to outgrow its shell.



"SLOW LIFTS AND NO STARBUCKS...THIS PLACE SUCKS!" SKIER: JAMES HEIM

Local ownership, family-style management and a democratic vision created the unified force steering the ski area toward sustainability. Starbucks, condos and sprawl have been intentionally left off the list in favor of ski-in/ski-out parking, diesel-powered chairs and a mindful preservation of the staggering alpine wilderness that frames the area. As a result, Howat's off-the-grid sanctuary has upheld its well-deserved reputation as largely unaffected:

The Cascadian roots of Baker's trusted caretakers run deep. Since his arrival, Howat has compiled a committed crew including longtime fixtures Denny Espeland, Boyd Starr, Angelo "Zop" Zopolos, and Jon and Martha Bengen, who still play leading operational roles at the area. Howat's daughters, Gwyn and Amy, are now the area's marketing directors. Even Highway Ted, the man who directs the battle to keep State Route 542 clear, has been plowing his plows for 15 years through 800 feet of snowfall. The lineage is intertwined and many share

the same pedigree, but all involved are forever related by their emotional investment in the place.

"I think one of the things that we have encouraged is people feel like they have ownership in the area. We listen to what people have to say as much as we can. I think the continuity of people is really strong with the amount of people who have stayed or have worked at the mountain or in Glacier, and who have been there for so many years. And just the loyal returning pass-holders, every year, is a big number. They feel that it is their mountain."

It is impossible to paint a picture of Baker without referencing the family feel. Starting in the homey Howat family apartment, which has hosted many at an extended dining room table, and filtering down to the late-night card games in the E-lodge cafeteria one floor below, each worker bee merits a place in the growing family

tree. Breaking from rigid resort hierarchies, full-time instructors and slide-savvy pro patrollers still bond over beers with fresh-faced rental techs and hard-living line cooks. Lift crews use rock-paper-scissors, not seniority, to settle who gets the first ski break. Second-generation employees, who have found their way back to load-test lifts or volunteer on patrol, work side-by-side with graying vets from their parents' era.

This same underlying atmosphere bonds the locals together. In knowing anticipation of every storm-snow day, familiar faces who collectively form Baker's distinctive mosaic line up early in the queue. Whether fifth-year seniors skipping class or pro-level talent with 100-plus underfoot, they have all found fraternity at Baker. Fathers ski with daughters, hippies mingle with hicks, and sagging hucksters take turns setting the bootpack with crusty AT gurus. Even charter members of the hard-charging "Army of Darkness" can be seen spinning laps with 9-to-5ers happily cashing in sick



BAKER'S VERSION OF A SKY-HIGH PRICE. SKIER: BANKS GILBERTI



days. The lift line is intentionally democratic with no shortcuts for private lessons, photo poses or platinum-card customers, and the caste system is based not on status or steeze, but how hard and fast you ski.

In fact, every ounce of the operation sits on the same foundation. The artisan-style White Salmon Day Lodge not only basks in Shuksan's dramatic shadow, but is also brown-bag friendly. Parking is free, dogs are welcome in predetermined areas and the tickets—which are still stuck on wickets and spout daily mantras like "Goggle Tan," "Point It" and "Mountain of Youth"—are priced within reach of working-class families. Even all-ages events like the 4,000-strong Golden Egg Hunt and locally cultivated Fall Film Festival extend an invitation to the wider community. On Saturdays, the Fifth Graders Free promotion and school-centric Winter Ride Program clogs the morning drive and overwhelms the Heather Meadows lodge, but introduces new generations of kids

to the hill. And, at the end of each day, plate-of-pasta dinner hour at Milano's in Glacier is testament to how one and all break bread together at Baker.

"A lot of ski areas are built just like golf courses: They are just the queen bee that attracts people in to buy real estate. Baker was always there, always has been, probably always will be there, just so you can ski and snowboard. That is it, that will always be the purpose."

At the end of the season, the Tap Room still felt the same. With three-buck PBR pints and "Highway to Hell" blaring full blast, this timeless nook on the third floor of Heather Meadows exists as a sanctuary where kinship is clear. Snapshots and magazine covers measure local immortality side by side on the bulletin board, but the appreciation of the faithful is what sets the tone between these sloped walls. Unlike programmatic

development companies who raze cherished temples to make room for the bigger, the bolder and the wealthier, Baker has carefully preserved the irreplaceable—like the Tap Room—that define its original character.

For those who have gravitated here, this constant provides solace. Baker will always exist as a pure ski hill. Even at the end of a tumultuous 800-inch year marked by pounding storm cycles and unexpected tragedy, community proved more powerful than the tempest. Not all who've found Baker see it as Elysium, but skiers who've weathered storm after storm respect the unseen effort made to preserve it. The reward for the family who made their mark on this mountain isn't measured in skier days or condo sales, but in the passion felt by those who proudly call it home. This enduring legacy is reason enough, for all of us who have seen the light, to raise a pint in celebration of the rare place that Baker has remained. ❧



DAVID REDDICK

If you want to save a mountain town, kill the Marlboro man.

Good defense against the ski development corporations that are rolling mountain communities begins with spiking an American myth: The West was not won by loners and self-made men. America was settled through cooperative effort (think the Mayflower and wagon trains, if you must succumb to romanticism), and by massive government investment and subsidy (think railroads, Interstate highways and Hoover Dam).

But we like to believe in John Wayne, John Ford and that myth of independence. That can be costly when the time comes to stand up to Intrawest or its imitators, who know how to divide and conquer. The only strategy I've seen that effectively stops corporate-driven bulldozing of mountain towns is a united front. A whole community must stand up and say, "No, thanks—your vision of the future is not ours." People did it in the Mad River Valley, Vermont. And for a long time they did it in Minturn, Colorado. Citizens collectively decided they weren't going to go along with a bottom-line-driven corporation's insidious, soothing murmurings about what was best for them.

America grants corporations extraordinary powers: They are persons in the eyes of the law, they have rights of free speech, they may overwhelm elections with their money, and so on. It isn't this way in many other places; it wasn't always this way in the United States, and there are people working hard to change the rules now. Still, it's hard to win when the game is rigged; if the battle in your town feels like David vs. Goliath, that's because it is.

Ski towns are notoriously fractious places; it's hard to imagine the residents of some agreeing on anything, especially in the midst of a big development battle. That's why planning for the future—before a developer comes knocking—is key. Create a community plan. Develop it over time from a broad cross-section of a community. Use elected officials to make it law.

With such a plan in hand, a town can legitimately deny a developer if the latter's schemes run against the plan—and have a decent chance of prevailing in court. Without such a plan, a savvy developer will exploit divisions, pour unprecedented quantities of money into local elections, and in all likelihood, carry the day.

Sure, go to public meetings, write letters, make a stink. But cast a cold eye on the rules of the game. Understand that our system of laws and property rights gives corporations the advantage, and push back by pushing first. By the time Big Skiing comes knocking at town hall, it may be too late. —Hal Clifford

Hal Clifford is the executive editor of Orion magazine and the author of Downhill Slide: Why the Corporate Ski Industry Is Bad for Skiing, Ski Towns, and the Environment.

WHAT TO DO WHEN THE MAN COMES KNOCKING ON YOUR SKI TOWN