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Carson National Forest Supervisor

Mr. James Duran

208 Cruz Alta Road

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Public Comment on Taos Ski Valley proposal for project approval within Special Use Permit / Master Development Plan.

Mr. Duran,

I am writing regarding Taos Ski Valley's request for project approval for components that were recently accepted in their Master development plan. I want to state that I am a proponent of the Taos Ski Valley's development and consider the improvements they are proposing as a beneficial use of public lands and significant environmental and economic benefit to the communities in Taos County.

The Base-to-Base Gondola will improve public access to the Carson National Forest during ski season and year-round. With the inevitable increased usage our public lands are experiencing, the trailhead capacity at the top of the Lake Fork of the Rio Hondo is inadequate. A Base-to-Base gondola would alleviate the congestion experienced at this location. The gondola would also lessen the heavy traffic experienced on Twining Road, which cannot handle the volumes of traffic it currently experiences. The road was never designed for the amount of traffic it carries, which leads to unsafe conditions for users, excessive dust and noise for village residents and tourists, and is a constant source of pollution for the Rio Hondo watershed. Because the road is overused, it is in a continual state of disrepair. Heavy summer rains and spring thaw lead to erosion and sediment being carried into the river. With ample paved parking in the resort's base area, a significant portion of the traffic on Twining Road could be reduced with a gondola being installed. During the ski season, when high wind conditions prohibit the operation of front side lifts, the gondola would provide access to backside lifts (where winds are not typically as fierce), keeping the mountain fully operational rather than limiting use to the beginner areas. A gondola would also offer beginner and intermediate skiers (the majority of the skier population) more accessible access to terrain that suits their skiing abilities. As you know, Taos Ski Valley is a steep mountain, and access to more suitable terrain for beginner and intermediate skiers can be an intimidating prospect by having to attain the top of the resort and then ski down the "Avalanche Road" to access the gentler terrain. Providing easy access to public lands for users of all abilities would be accomplished by installing a Base-to Base Gondola.

Replacement of Chairlifts 2 and 8 is the logical decision as both of these lifts are reaching the end of their acceptable lifespans. Taos Ski Valley wants to provide its guests and public lands users with the best possible experience, and these lifts are making that goal increasingly difficult. Chair 2 sees long wait times on capacity days and peak periods in the morning and early afternoon. Because of the nature of the mountain and beginner skiers trying to access more suitable terrain on the backside during these times, the chair is stopped and slowed frequently, adding to the wait and diminishing the experience. A high-speed lift with a slower loading platform would help alleviate this issue. Chair 8, "the longest & slowest ride in the Rockies," we joke when riding it, also experiences congestion and multiple slowing and stopping events because of the loading of beginner skiers. The queue zone for this chair is also inadequate during peak periods. It is dangerous, in my opinion, as the ski

trail from the west (Lower Stauffenberg) terminates in the queue area at the bottom of a steep blind corner. Snowmaking upgrades at Taos Ski Valley are long overdue. The proposed booster station and water tank would significantly increase the amount of terrain to be opened in the shortest amount of time possible. Water storage capacity would enable the resort to take advantage of optimal conditions for making snow and decrease the demands placed on the Rio Hondo when these conditions occur. The resort's decision to increase backside snowmaking potential by utilizing frontside pumping equipment and gravity feeding water over the top of the mountain decreases reliance on the much smaller capacity of the Lake Fork of the Rio Hondo. Having water storage that can be utilized to rapidly make snow and open additional beginner and intermediate terrain will benefit the majority of the general public who use these public lands for recreational purposes. Water storage would also benefit wildland fire fighting capabilities if the Rio Hondo Canyon or other areas in the region were to experience the outbreak of a wildfire. Water "pumpkins" could be set up in the parking lots for engine and helicopter water stations, potentially decreasing turnaround time on filling and getting water to the fire. Utilization of the on-mountain snowmaking system could also be beneficial in a wildfire situation near the resort.

The proposed Nordic/Snowshoe area would give visitors to public lands more options for recreation both in the winter and summer seasons. Many visitors may not partake in downhill skiing pursuits and would be inclined to experience the winter environment in a more casual setting. The Nordic/Snowshoe area would be ideally suited for their activities. Additionally, more hiking in the Kachina Basin/Chair 4 area would offer guests additional recreational opportunities not participating in mountain biking and Via-Ferrata activities.

The Whistle Stop restaurant is another facility at Taos Ski Valley long overdue for a replacement. The building is old, decomposing, and does not provide adequate service for public land guests. The building does not provide adequate access (ADA compliant) to its facilities and is in a terrible location for ski traffic flow and safety; at one time, it served its need, but the need has grown, and the facility is incapable of meeting current demands. The restroom facilities are disgusting, and the whole building smells like urine; I have many female companions who will not use the facilities there and would instead go off into the woods or return to the base than venture into the Whistle Stop. A relocated and modernized facility near this location would better suit the needs of the modern skiing public. They would be held to ADA compliance making for a more equitable facility for public land users.

In closing, the proposed projects Taos Ski Valley wants to undertake within the parameters of this scoping session would significantly benefit public land users in the Carson National Forest. Increasing access to terrain and recreational opportunities within the Ski Area's Special Use Permit and surrounding lands, making the village roads less congested and decreasing point source pollution into the Rio Hondo and its tributaries, better utilization of the resorts snowmaking system for both the manufacturing of snow within the resort boundary and potential additional resource for wildland fire fighting capabilities and modern ADA compliant facilities for the beneficial usage of all public land visitors are all benefits of approving the current list of projects at Taos Ski Valley. Additionally, the economic benefits that Taos Ski Valley brings to Taos County, I feel, far outweigh any perceived environmental degradations that might be thought to occur with these proposed projects. The fact is, Taos Ski Valley Inc. is a responsible business that holds itself to the highest standards of the best industry practices and is a valued partner in this community with its social and environmental involvement. These partnerships need to be encouraged and fostered within the scope of public land access, management, and use.

Respectfully Submitted,  
Carl Weinmeister  
Taos, NM