

Master Plan Variance Approval

Property Name: Rib Mt. State Park

Date Master Plan was Approved: Rib Mountain State Park Master Plan - 1982;
Rib Mt. State Park Ski Area Master Plan - 1984

A. Variance to the 1982 Rib Mountain State Park Master Plan:

Figure 2a, titled "proposed boundary," is replaced by the Revised Figure 2a (attached). The revised map updates the current park boundary, ownership within the boundary, and the revised ski hill lease area. The acreage of the lease area is 385 acres. All the leased ski hill area is designated as an Intensive Recreation Development Area.

B. Variances to the 1984 Rib Mountain State Park Ski Hill Area Master Plan:

1. The ski hill master plan provides the broad, conceptual framework for the ski hill facilities and operations, such as the general use of the area, the boundaries of the leased area and the maximum design capacity for the facilities. The ski hill lease document shall govern implementation of the ski hill master plan, including the appropriate details or procedures related to the design, development, operation and specific uses of the ski hill facilities and leased area.
2. Plate 2, a map showing the 1984 ski hill development plan, is replaced by the revised Plate 2 (attached) showing the revised lease area (385 acres) and the updated conceptual ski hill development plan.
3. Use of the ski hill lease area primarily focuses on alpine skiing, snow boarding, snow tubing, cross-country skiing and other winter activities with an outdoor recreational focus. Secondary, compatible non-snow season outdoor recreation uses are encouraged, and they may include activities like mountain biking, horseback riding and special events which do not create a significant negative impact upon adjacent neighbors.

Approved: _____ **Date:** _____

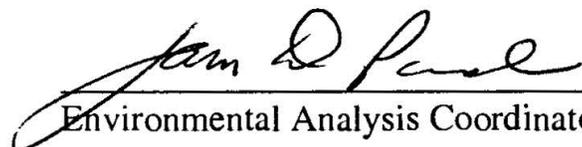
Administrator, Division of Lands

Variance Author; Tom Watkins, FL/4

Supporting Approvals



Department Master Planning Manager, LF Date; 10-8-01



Environmental Analysis Coordinator; I certify that all WEPA requirements have been met. Date; 10/8/01

Property Manager Date; _____

Regional Director, Land Leader or Basin Leader Date; _____

Program Bureau Director,

Program Bureau Director, Date; _____

Others with a special interest;

Date; _____

Date; _____

SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Purpose and Need for the Proposed Variances *(include background and history as appropriate):*

In 2000 the Department negotiated a new 30 year lease for operation of the Rib Mountain State Park Ski Hill with Granite Peak Corporation. In order to meet the demands of the present day recreation market and ensure the viability of the ski hill, the terms of the lease allow a substantial up-grading of the existing ski runs and support facilities. These proposed actions are within the scope of the full development plan outlined in the 1984 Ski Hill Master Plan; however, the configuration of the ski runs and the boundary of the leased area are changed to meet current state-of-the-art ski run designs, to take better advantage of the height of the hill, and to minimize conflicts between the ski hill developments and the state park users and neighbors. The new lease area reflects changes necessary to accommodate the revised ski run layout, primarily extending further to the west near the top of the hill, and also changes due to land acquisitions since 1982. The plan variances recognize these adjustments, updating both the 1982 park master plan and the 1984 ski hill master plan.

As indicated above, a number of small land parcels were purchased since 1982. Some were adjacent to but outside of the 1982 park boundary. The approval of these land purchases also included changing the park boundary to include the new lands within the park. However, the master plan maps were not revised to reflect these recent boundary changes. The revised Figure 2a also serves this purpose.

Variance two to the 1984 ski hill plan clarifies the respective functional roles of the ski hill master plan and the lease document. It is added to avoid confusion and unnecessary duplication between the master plan and lease. As the specific details regarding how the conceptual ski hill plan will be achieved are typically negotiated between the Department and the lessee, the lease agreement is the most appropriate document for directing the specific development, operations and use of the ski hill.

Variance three to the 1984 ski hill plan updates and clarifies the intended types of uses for the lease area bringing it in-line with those identified in the new lease agreement. The reason for the change is that since the 1984 ski hill plan was drafted a number of activities beyond alpine skiing, like snow-boarding and mountain biking, have become common ski area uses, and they were not recognized in the 1984 plan.

Unavoidable Adverse Impacts:

The new configuration of the ski runs extend the runs to the west into an area that previously was not targeted for ski run development. The runs in this area will be narrow, therefore only a small amount of clearing (approximately 22 acres) is needed for the western runs. The visual impact will be minimal. Other alternative locations for the extended runs (extended up the hill to gain maximum elevation) would have significant impacts upon the picnic area and other state park non-ski hill facilities. The visual

impacts of these alternatives would be considerably greater than for the proposed location.

Cumulative impacts: the overall ski-hill redevelopment includes adding new, narrow runs covering about 25 acres to the east of the original runs and also substantially narrowing the original, wide ski runs (reforesting 15 acres). (Note; a plan variance is not needed for these actions as they are within the area covered by the 1984 ski-hill redevelopment plan). Adding new runs to the east and west of the original runs will expand the foot-print of the ski operation and the cleared area by about 32 acres. However, the shift from wide, open ski runs to narrow runs will substantially mitigate the visual impact of the expansions, and possibly the ski-hill development as a whole.

Compatibility with Statutes, Codes and Department Policies:

The proposed plan variances comply with all statutes, administrative codes and department policies.

Federal Aid Limitations *(cite if any federal aid moneys are involved with either acquisition or management of the property and whether the proposed plan variance is compatible with the aid requirements):*

LWCON funds have been used at Rib Mountain State Park. The proposed variances are consistent with land uses allowed under LWCON.

How the Master Plan Supports the Proposed Variance *(cite how the proposed variance is consistent with the provisions of the master plan):*

1. The proposed variance to the 1982 Rib Mountain State Park master plan is fully consistent with the park's master plan goal and objectives. The variance brings the park master plan in-line with the ski hill development level approved in the 1984 ski hill master plan.
2. The full development conceptual plan outlined in the 1984 ski hill master plan set specific limits on the ultimate design capacity for the ski hill facilities as well as the number of acres that could be cleared for ski runs. The new revised ski hill design is within the parameters set by the 1984 plan. An ultimate size of the lease area was not set by the 1984 ski hill plan, although its general size and approximate location is inferred by the plan's ski hill development map. The revised plan approximates the size of the 1984 concept design, but the lease area's shape is slightly reconfigured.

The Public Review Process Used *(summary of who was notified about the proposal or otherwise reviewed the proposal and the meetings, mailings and other techniques used:*

The Department has carried out an intensive public involvement process for the Rib Mountain ski hill redevelopment and expansion plans since April 1999. The public has had substantial involvement and impact upon the scope and design of the plan. The involvement process included contacts with local government officials, news releases, mailings to 3,300 area residents, periodic open-house public meetings, and meetings with the Friends of Rib Mountain State Park.. Additionally there has been substantial coverage by local papers, radio and television. The most recent public informational meeting was held on July 9, 2001 at the Marathon County Public Library.

Description of the Support and/or Opposition to the Proposed Variance (including reasons for the various positions taken) and Any Unresolved Issues or Concerns:

Most persons in opposition to the ski hill expansion project are against the entire expansion project in general, with the strongest opposition targeting the potential sale or exchange of park land for condo development (which is not part of this plan variance). In regard to the ski run expansion, opposition primarily focuses on the aesthetic or environmental impacts of timber cutting, such as loss of naturalness or wildlife habitat. Some expressed the view the expansion as an undesirable commercialization of the park. In the last comment period (July 2001) comments were 2:1 in opposition to the expansion. Most comments were from local area residents.

Persons favoring the ski hill expansion believe it will bring a strong economic and recreational benefit to the community.

SUPPLEMENTAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REVIEW RIB MT. STATE PARK MASTER PLAN VARIANCE, 2001

The environmental assessment (EA) prepared on the 1984 State Park Ski Area Master Plan examined a ski-hill expansion of the type and magnitude being proposed by the current operator. The new ski-hill plan primarily differs from the plan examined in 1984 in the configuration of the ski runs. Part of the western ski runs, the area that is the subject of this plan variance, extend outside of the area evaluated in 1984. As part of the master plan variance process the impacts in key areas were reevaluated to ensure significant impact are not overlooked. No significant potential impacts were found during this review. A summary of the areas reevaluated and the results is below:

Highways and traffic; The primary access route to the ski area is County Highway NN. In 1984 there were 31 residences and four businesses along this route. Conditions have only slightly changed since 1984. Today there are 27 residences, eight businesses and one church. Under phase two development (maximum development level) there would be an estimated increase of 638 vehicles/day to the ski-hill. Local Highway "NN" residents and persons who regularly travel this stretch of highway may notice increases in traffic at peak ski-hill use times, specifically on nights or weekends between December 15th and March 1st. However, these hours are non-peak traffic periods. According to James Griesbach, Senior Engineering Specialist, Marathon County Highway Department, (letter, April 2001) the additional daily traffic should have any impact on the local highway system, due to the fact most of the traffic will be at non-peak traffic months and times of day. Additionally, traffic flow along the route will be improved over the next few years by the rebuilding of the CTH "NN" and USH 51 Interchange and the widening/repaving of CTH "NN".

Stormwater run-off; The 2001 ski-hill development plan contains a detailed stormwater assessment and a management plan. The new stormwater management plan is designed to handle a 100 year rain event occurring with full snow cover. (The local town government requested the management plan only cover a 25 year event.) The capacity of existing water retention basins would be expanded to hold the excess flow. Additionally, cut-off swales would be constructed to prevent run-off from flowing into the Rib View Park and Sunset Ridge sub-divisions.

Reviews of the stormwater management plan by a DNR wastewater specialist and the Town of Rib Mountain's consulting engineer (pers. com. Brad Johnson) verifies the plan is based on appropriate runoff calculation methods and that the proposed management practices will be adequate to control excess runoff from the ski hill.

Rock formations; Possible construction impacts to prominent rock outcrops near the upper terminus of the western ski lifts were a concern. Based on a joint site visit by the ski-hill developer, park staff and representatives of the park friends group the location of the ski runs were adjusted to avoid impacts to significant geological formations in the area (Willman, memo, May 2001).

Historic resources; A cultural resources report for Rib Mountain State Park (Victoria Dirst, 1996) indicates there are no known archeological sites within the park. The report further indicates there is a low probability of sites being within the park, because most archeological sites are found near water. All historic structures within the park are located outside of the ski-run development area. However, hiking trails built in the 1930's by the CCC are located in the vicinity of the proposed new western ski runs. After on site consultation by DNR staff and ski hill representatives the chair lift location was sited in a location that will have no impact on any CCC trails in the park (Bishop, memo, September 2001).

Endangered or rare species; A rare plant survey was conducted in the vicinity of the proposed western ski runs to ensure that no endangered or threatened plants would be impacted. No rare species were located, including *Botrychium mormo*, Goblin Fern, a Wisconsin endangered plant. The report indicates the site has been severely impacted by exotic earthworms and deer. The survey was conducted by Yellowfield Biological Surveys, September 2001.

The area for the western ski run expansion is a stand of saw-timber size sugar maple, red oak, and basswood. The area was thought to be potential nesting habitat for the rare Cerulean Warbler and Hooded Warbler. According to Sumner Matteson, Avian Ecologist, Bureau of Endangered Resources, it is doubtful these birds breed in the area, given their breeding range, the large blocks of suitable habitat required, because the area is in an urban location (Daniels, memo, September 2001). Sumner further stated that the proposed ski run project would not likely adversely affect either species if adjacent habitat is suitable to meet the needs of a (probable) small number of nesting pairs. Mike Willman and DNR Wildlife biologist, Rich Wissink, concluded that if these birds are present, suitable habitat remains within other areas of the park.

DATE: September 13, 2001

FILE REF: Rib Mountain

TO: Mike Willman
Dawn Bishop
Tom Watkins, Madison

FROM: Dave Daniels, Rhinelander

SUBJECT: Granite Peak Variance Meeting Results

On the evening of July 9, 2001, the Department conducted a public informational meeting regarding the proposed Master Plan Variance for Rib Mountain State Park. The variance is proposed to provide for the ski hill additions and enhancements by Granite Peak Corporation. The department's stated purpose for the meeting was to gather comments from the public on the proposed Master Plan Variance.

Representatives of Granite Peak Corporation attended the meeting to provide their perspective of the project to members of the public.

The following information summarizes the results of the public meeting.

According to the sign-in sheet provided to collect names and addresses of interested citizens, 118 people attended the meeting. Those people had the opportunity to visit with department staff regarding the proposed variance for the project, and to discuss anything else about the entire scope of the ski hill expansion that may interest them.

Department staff provided copies of 100 full color maps of the of the enlarged leased area along with copies of the variance document, 1984 environmental assessment, copies of NHI documents.

Local media including television, radio and the printed media covered the event and interviewed department staff and members of the public. The public meeting and stories about the project appeared on the front page of the Wausau Daily Herald newspaper in the days leading up to the meeting. The newspaper provided front-page coverage of the results of the meeting the following day. Local television and radio stations all provided coverage of the event the day of and the day following the meeting

Visitors to the meeting could leave their comments with DNR staff members or provide written comments on flip chart paper and comment forms provided throughout the meeting room. In addition, members of the public could provide their comments via e-mail, telephone and regular mail to the DNR Service Center office in Rhinelander. The public comment period ended on Monday July 23, 2001.

To date, 45 separate written comments were received on comment forms provided during the course of the meeting. 28 of those responding on the comment forms wrote in opposition to all or portions of the proposals, and 17 people wrote in favor of the proposals.

Others contributed to 6 full pages of flip chart paper with various comments on the project during the course of the four-hour informational meeting. Six letters were received in the mail following the meeting, nearly all of them were in opposition to the proposals. 67 people provided comments via e-mail following the meeting, of those 49 people wrote their opposition to the proposals and 18 people were in

favor of the proposals.

Generally the public comments received so far indicate a sincere concern for the environment and natural resources of Rib Mountain State Park.

Most who attended the public informational meeting or who have commented on the project since that time, are against the entire expansion project in general, with particular worries about the sale or swap of public land within the park boundary in specific. This probably represents a majority of the sentiment of those who have commented on the overall project.

If the two issues, plan variance and land swap, are separated there seems to be somewhat less resistance to the development of new ski runs and associated infrastructure as suggested in the variance, than there is regarding the sale or swap of state land to a private business. On this latter point, there is strong concern that the department should not allow the swap of land to proceed. On the former point, many people stated that the eastern ski runs cut this spring should be the last of timber cutting in the park.

The following quotes from the comments received to date represent the general tenor of those sentiments.

"We do not want any more slopes cut in, or any more destruction of the property on the DNR/State owned property. Please be concerned about the long range effects of this cutting."

Wausau Resident

"I could not be more against developing Rib Mountain State Park. I feel tearing up/tearing down the trees and natural surroundings is a disgrace that should not be allowed. I am upset it is even being considered."

Wausau Resident

"I'm concerned about the impact on the environment. The ski runs are already there. When I read in the papers they were going to put the timber ski runs in it was upsetting. Some expansion can be expected. But now the new "condo" concept is outrageous."

Wausau Resident

"This is an ill conceived plan that should have been curtailed before the damage has been done!"

Wausau Resident

While some people might find some expansion on the hill acceptable, many looked at the overall project and believe that selling or swapping state park land for private development is unacceptable and is a bad precedent for the state to set.

"Parkland should not become a "Six Flags" type of amusement/recreation site."

Wausau Resident

"...we should never sell or trade our land for their profit."

Wausau Resident

"As far as the condo's are concerned, we have enough housing in Rib Mountain and surrounding it to take care of everyone."

Wausau Resident

Those in favor of the new ski runs and the project at large looked to the economic and recreational benefit that improved skiing on the hill would bring.

"The ski area is a great asset to the community. Granite Peak management has done a great job. Our family supports them."

Wausau Resident

"I especially like your expansion plans for the runs. The amenities should be a real boost."

Wausau Resident

"We like Rib all summer and fall and this improvement for year round activities is great. 100% behind the expansion."

Wausau Resident

Some people opposed to the expansion project were also opposed to the process that the department used to allow expansion activities already underway.

"...the after the fact input from Rib Mountain residents. This is what is going to happen. Your opinion doesn't matter because it's going to happen anyway."

Wausau Resident

"All of the citizens should be aware of this, not just the skiers. There isn't enough coverage."

Wausau Resident

Finally, some people asked whether a master plan for the property that dates to the mid-1980's is really the document to allow the expansion project to proceed.

"In light of current growth, development pressure, environmental awareness, a master plan from '83 is antique and out of date."

In sum, most who have provided comments to date on either the proposed plan variance or the sale/swap of state land are against the idea. Some have said that the project in its entirety should go ahead for the recreational and economic benefit of the community.

In the days following the public meeting, and until the present time, members of the public have continued to show their concern for and against the project by sending numerous letters and e-mails to the department, contacting their local legislators and making contacts with their federal representatives.