

Mount Washington in line for Games windfall

Announcement gives green light to expansion plan

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No B.C. area outside Greater Vancouver and Whistler had more riding on the outcome of the Winter Games decision than Comox Valley/Mount Washington, which dispatched ski hill and tourism officials to the Olympic announcement events at both The Empress and GM Place.

Immediately after Wednesday's International Olympic Committee decision from Prague, Mount Washington announced blueprints for a \$2.2-million expansion plan over seven years to tie into the 2010 Vancouver Winter Olympics.

The Island ski hill has kilometres of cross-country trails, almost identical elevation and snow conditions to the 2010 Games' Nordic venue in the Callaghan Valley and Comox airport is nearby. So Mount Washington is expected to be home to numerous international Nordic teams in the three-month acclimatization and training period needed to prepare for Nordic events.

It will be hard to accommodate training at the Callaghan Valley before the 2010 Games. And European Nordic teams, followed intensely by their sporting media, will be looking for pre-Games

training sites away from the glare of Whistler and the Callaghan Valley.

For Mount Washington public relations and promotions director Dave Hampshire, the future was flashing before his eyes as IOC president Jacques Rogge stepped to the podium in Prague.

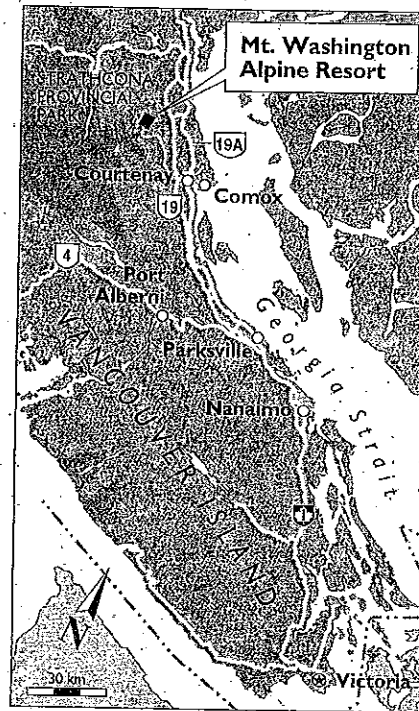
"We have seven years to turn this into a reality," he said. "This will fast-track by two to five years, plans we already have for the mountain. We'll capitalize on the Games and we'll grow faster."

Hampshire said the Island ski hill will look to various federal and provincial programs, as well as the private sector, to fund its 2010 expansion. That expansion is expected to increase the current 55 kilometres of trails to well over 100 kilometres. Also in the plans is a Nordic stadium oval and 2,500-square-foot support building.

"The aim of Mount Washington is to garner national and international Nordic team training ahead of the Olympic competitions to be held at the Callaghan Valley facility," said Hampshire.

The norm for Nordic teams is to train at a venue that is similar to the competition site, sometimes years ahead of the Games, to ensure athlete acclimatization and technical prowess in areas such as waxing.

Peter Gibson, president of Mount Washington Alpine Resort, and his staff have been preparing resort plans based on a successful 2010 B.C. bid. Gibson travelled to Soldier Hollow, the 2002 Salt Lake City Winter Olympics Nordic



venue, to study facilities and terrain and to make those key connections with Olympic coaches and teams. Gibson was stunned to learn some European countries take Nordic so seriously, that certain ski waxes at Soldier Hollow in 2002 were selling for more per ounce than gold.

"We're expecting to be host to many international teams," said Hampshire. "We have so many more advantages — proximity and identical conditions to the

Callaghan Valley — than does Silver Star (the Vernon area ski hill that has the only other possible Nordic training facilities in B.C.)."

Team Canada, including 2002 Salt Lake City medallist Beckie Scott, already trains each spring at Mount Washington along with the junior national team.

Meanwhile, the mayors of Victoria, Saanich, Oak Bay and View Royal have already met with facilitator Hugh MacDonald of SportHost Victoria to begin the process of putting together a regional proposal, possibly in the \$10-million range, for so-called Games live sites. The provincial government will grant up to \$5 million in matching funds, from a fund of \$40 million, for B.C. cities and towns outside the Lower Mainland that come up with the best proposals for gathering places to watch the Games in 2010 on large screens.

MacDonald said the most exciting idea remains a new 5,000-seat Greater Victoria stadium, expandable to 15,000 seats.

Esquimalt Mayor Darwin Robinson said he hasn't had a chance to sit down with the other mayors but that he is supportive of a regional facility.

And although the City of Victoria won't pony up the extra millions to make the new arena ice sheet expandable to Olympic proportions, arena developer and RG Properties owner Graham Lee has been in discussions with the 2010 Olympic committee concerning training venue possibilities for the \$30-million rink.

TIMES COLONIST JULY 4/03