

ASPEN MOUNTAIN

∞ | MASTER 2018 | DEVELOPMENT PLAN

January 2018



ASPEN MOUNTAIN

∞ | MASTER 2010 | DEVELOPMENT 2012 | PLAN



January 2018

ACCEPTED BY:

A handwritten signature in blue ink, which appears to read "Scott Fitzwilliams". The signature is written over a horizontal line.

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DATE: 3/2/2018

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Note: all appendices are provided in electronic format only



I. INTRODUCTION

This 2018 Master Development Plan (MDP) for Aspen Mountain amends and updates the existing 1997 Aspen Mountain Master Plan (AMMP). This MDP provides a detailed assessment of existing facilities and operations on Aspen Mountain, as well as a comprehensive overview of planned elements within the Aspen Mountain special use permit (SUP) area and on private lands. The MDP discusses planned year-round activities, including both winter and summer components slated for implementation over the next ten to fifteen years. United States Forest Service (Forest Service) acceptance of this MDP is consistent with the requirements of the Aspen Mountain SUP, but does not approve any projects contained within the document. The MDP is designed to be dynamic, and may be amended periodically to reflect new developments in facilities and recreation. Pitkin County's acceptance of this MDP will be via a separate Pitkin County Board of County Commissioners (BOCC) Resolution and Ordinance.

The White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan – 2002 Revision (2002 Forest Plan) provides the following direction for the preparation and utilization of ski area MDPs:

“A Master Development Plan is part of each ski area’s special use permit. MDPs are prepared by the permit holder and accepted by the Forest Service. They describe the improvements and facilities that are authorized at each resort and are the guiding document used to describe the expected future condition for the resort. These plans encompass all the area authorized for use by the special use permit including areas that are, at present, undeveloped. Areas allocated are managed to avoid deterioration of site conditions that may detract from planned uses.”¹

¹ White River National Forest Land and Resource Management Plan, 2002 Revision, p. 3-81



Aspen Mountain remains one of the most iconic ski experiences within the Aspen Snowmass area, the region, and the Western U.S. boasting a world-renowned reputation. While Aspen Mountain is relatively small when compared to other Western ski areas, locals claim that every bit of its approximately 700 skiable acres are captivating and that, “it skis much bigger than it is.” The primary objective for Aspen Mountain is to offer all guests the highest standard of recreational opportunities while preserving the history and character of the area that defines the Aspen experience. This MDP utilizes innovative mountain planning techniques that will enhance the guest experience while maintaining appropriate skier densities and respecting the unique character of Aspen Mountain.

Since 1997 ASC has implemented several of the proposed projects identified in the 1997 AMMP. The most significant of these projects was the construction of a new Sundeck Restaurant. Since that time, several lifts were also upgraded and/or replaced with new state-of-the-art technology. Many ski trails and parts of the snowmaking systems have also undergone renovations since 1997. Lastly, and most recently, there have been enhancements to landscaping and guest amenities at the summit to improve the experience for summer visitors.

Nationally, the ski industry set an all-time record in annual skier visits in 2007/08 and 2010/11, with approximately 60.5 million visits. Over the last ten seasons (2007/08–2016/17), the average number of visits recorded nationally was 56.4 million. Skier visits during the 2007/08 and 2010/11 seasons were 7.3% above this ten-year average. Despite the distinct national economic downturn in 2009, the 2008/09 ski season displayed the remarkable resilience of the ski industry.² The 2011/12 season saw a significant downturn, but skier visits have since rebounded. These years of generally consistent growth can be seen as a strong indicator of the industry’s durability in challenging economic times.

Exceeding the 60 million visit threshold during the 2007/08 and 2010/11 seasons was a significant milestone for the ski industry. These years highlight an era of strong performance within the U.S. ski industry that has been ongoing since the 2000/01 season, in which visits have reached 56 to 60 million in good years and 54 to 55 million in poor years—both significantly above the levels recorded in previous decades.³

Given the growth in the national skier market, it is important for resorts to constantly evaluate their offerings to serve the demand for Alpine skiing. This MDP seeks to proactively address future trends in both winter and summer recreation on Aspen Mountain. Understanding that guests’ preferences are constantly changing, this MDP will address those trends in proactive and creative ways. In so doing, the plan will reinforce the values of the community within the Roaring Fork Valley, Pitkin County and the City of Aspen, the business objectives of ASC, and the natural resource and recreational goals of the White River National Forest (WRNF).

In addition to its consistency with the 2002 Forest Plan, this MDP is consistent with the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act of 2011 (SAROE) and subsequent Forest Service guidance, which permit additional seasonal and year-round activities and facilities on National Forest System (NFS) lands that meet the setting and support snow sports as a primary driver for recreation and revenue at Aspen Mountain.

² National Ski Areas Association. 2017.
Kottke National End of Season Survey 2016/17.

³ Ibid.

A. LOCATION

Aspen Mountain is located on lands under the jurisdiction of the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District of the WRNF, Pitkin County, and the City of Aspen. It is approximately 200 miles west of Denver, and 40 miles southeast of Glenwood Springs on Colorado State Highway 82. See Figure I-1 for a map of the vicinity.

The SUP area encompasses approximately 326 acres of land contained within Sections 13, 24, and 25, Township 10S, Range 84W, and within Sections 18, 19 and 30 Township 10S, Range 85W. The existing “operational boundary” for Aspen Mountain encompasses approximately 886 acres. The SUP area(s) on Aspen Mountain are unusual in that they are a combined set of noncontiguous parcels situated in and around private lands. The elevation ranges from approximately 7,900 feet at the base, to 11,200 feet at the summit.

B. LAND OWNERSHIP

Aspen Mountain is different from many of the other resorts on the WRNF in that most of the land on which the current ski area boundary exists is privately owned (84%), with relatively little being NFS lands (16%). The private lands were divided and purchased as private mining claims during the mining era between 1890 and 1905. ASC currently owns many of the privately held mining claims and/or has ski easements on the claims it doesn’t own.

The Pitkin County Zoning Map delineates the existing ski area as the SKI-REC Zone District which comprises 1,225 acres. Most of the approximately 326 acres of Forest Service-administered SUP is within the SKI-REC Zone District. Additionally, approximately 16.3 acres within the City of Aspen’s boundary is also owned by ASC. See Figure I-2 for a Property Ownership map. NOTE: Pitkin County GIS data was used as the basis for this map and, due to the complexity of ownership, individual projects may require a physical land survey to receive final authorization.

C. CURRENT RESORT OPERATIONS SUMMARY

The facilities and infrastructure on Aspen Mountain are owned and operated by ASC, a privately-held Limited Liability Company that also owns/operates Aspen Highlands, Buttermilk Mountain and Snowmass. As one of ASC’s four resorts, Aspen Mountain enjoys wide-spread renown as one of the world’s premier destination resorts. It attracts a wide national and international destination market, but is also a regional destination, and thus sees significant visitation from local markets.

As shown in Table I-1, Aspen Mountain’s annual visitation over the past ten seasons has averaged 310,010 with fluctuations resulting from varying snowfall and economic conditions. However, since the period’s low mark of 271,657 in 2008/09, there has been a strong upward trend, with a 28% growth in annual skier visits between 2008/09 and 2015/16. Aspen Mountain averages 146 operational days per season.

Table I-1. Annual Skier Visits (2007–2017)

Season	Visitation
2016/17	331,457
2015/16	346,580
2014/15	318,896
2013/14	330,034
2012/13	290,108
2011/12	295,749
2010/11	291,904
2009/10	294,439
2008/09	271,657
2007/08	332,981
Ten-Year Average	310,381



1. Winter

Aspen Mountain offers 699 acres of total skiable terrain spread amongst three distinct skiing pods: Ajax Express/Gent's Ridge, Bell Mountain/Little Nell, Ruthie's/F.I.S./Shadow Mountain. Within these three distinct skiing pods are lift-accessed traditional, cleared, mostly groomable, ski trails for intermediate, advanced, and expert skiers—accounting for 475 acres of the developed terrain; and lift-accessed gladed and/or open, but minimally maintained terrain for advanced and expert skiers—accounting for 224 acres of the total skiable terrain. These different terrain types will be discussed in detail in Chapter IV.

The Silver Queen Gondola serves as the primary mountain access from the mountain's base in the City of Aspen. Additional access is provided by the Shadow Mountain chairlift (1A) from the top of Aspen Street.

Aspen Mountain is currently served by eight lifts:

- 1 six-passenger detachable gondola
- 1 detachable quad chairlift
- 1 detachable triple chairlift
- 2 fixed-grip quad chairlifts
- 3 fixed-grip double chairlifts

The following programs and uses are a part of Aspen Mountain's winter resort operations:

- Alpine skiing, snowboarding, Nordic downhill, snowshoeing, ski biking, backcountry tours, and other snow sports activities supported by chairlifts (NFS and private lands)
- Learning activities and lessons for all activities listed above (NFS and private lands)
- NASTAR racing and special events/competitions in all of the above program uses (NFS and private lands)
- Filmmaking for in-house marketing/advertising needs (NFS and private lands)
- On-mountain food service, retail opportunities and performance centers (NFS and private lands)
- On-mountain concerts and festivals on private lands (NFS and private lands—additional review per Forest Service Manual [FSM] 2340 required for such activities on NFS lands)
- Nighttime activities and dining opportunities at on-mountain facilities with access via lifts or snowcats (NFS and private lands)
- Snowmaking and snow grooming activities (NFS and private lands)
- Vehicle and lift maintenance activities (NFS and private lands)



2. Summer

Current summer resort operations at Aspen Mountain primarily include dispersed activities, specifically lift-served sight-seeing and hiking via the Silver Queen Gondola. Non-lift-served activities are also popular on Aspen Mountain. Trails within the SUP area connect with well-established trail networks outside the Aspen Mountain SUP area on NFS lands and on private lands within Pitkin County and the City of Aspen.

Additional summer resort operations include various recreational opportunities, some of which have been offered on Aspen Mountain since the 1990s. These activities are particularly important to the community and resort guests because they provide opportunities to participate in unique mountain experiences on NFS lands in a comfortable setting. Existing uses and facilities include:

- Scenic gondola rides providing mountain activity access (NFS and private lands)
- Food and beverage services at the Sundeck Restaurant (private lands)
- Banquets, meetings and events (NFS and private lands)
- Hiking trails (NFS and private lands)
- Disc golf courses (NFS and private lands)
- Guided nature walks (NFS and private lands)
- Children's nature based playground (NFS and private lands)
- Music performances, concerts and other artistic or cultural activities (NFS and private lands)

Summer use on Aspen Mountain is generated primarily by visitors staying in the City of Aspen; however, the resort's proximity to the Town of Snowmass Village and the Roaring Fork Valley is also a major draw for summer visitation. While many attractions exist in the City of Aspen and surrounding areas, the nature-based activities provided on Aspen Mountain, coupled with the existing ski area infrastructure and amenities, offer an experience for guests not commonly available on NFS lands.





D. BACKGROUND

As mentioned, Aspen Mountain is primarily situated on wholly owned or leased private lands within Pitkin County or the City of Aspen. A lesser portion of Aspen Mountain exists on NFS lands managed by the Aspen-Sopris Ranger District of the WRNF. The Aspen Mountain resort is owned by ASC, and operates under a SUP from the Forest Service. The SUP requires the development of an MDP, which identifies management direction and opportunities for future management of the ski area on NFS lands. Aspen Mountain ski terrain within Pitkin County is included in the SKI-REC Zone District. Zoning and land use issues within the SKI-REC Zone District are regulated by Pitkin County. However, the lowest slopes on the Mountain are within the City of Aspen and zoned "Conservation," allowing recreation, ski lifts and other ski facilities.

1. *Chronology of Development*

The Boat Tow was installed in 1938 and became the first lift on Aspen Mountain. Roch Run and the Willoughby Ski Jump were also developed that same year and became some of Aspen Mountain's first ski trails. In 1946, the Forest Service issued the original permit for skiing to the Aspen Ski Corporation (changed to Aspen Skiing Company in 1989) and the original Lifts 1 and 2 were constructed. At the time of construction, Lifts 1 and 2 comprised the longest lift system in the world.

Between the years 1953 and 1959, the original Lift 3, Lift 4 (Little Nell), Lift 5 (Bell Mountain) and Lift 6 (FIS) were constructed; and in 1961, the Forest Service issued a thirty-year extension to the original SUP. The original Lift 8 (Ruthie's) was constructed in 1963 and in 1971, Lift 1A (Shadow Mountain) replaced the original Lift 1. Following the 1976/77 snow drought season, snowmaking was installed on the Little Nell slope.

The 1980s were characterized by a series of projects that solidified Aspen Mountain as the world class destination it is today. These projects included:

- The construction of Lift 7 (Gent's Ridge), as a fixed-grip quad chairlift in 1985 (NFS and private lands)
- The construction of the Silver Queen Gondola in 1986 as the longest single stage gondola in the world (NFS and private lands)
- The shortening and realignment of Lift 4 (Little Nell) as a fixed-grip quad chairlift in 1986 (private lands)
- The replacement of Lift 3 (Ajax Express) with a fixed-grip quad in 1985, which was then upgraded to a detachable quad chairlift in 1987 (NFS and private lands)
- Additions of snowmaking to Spar Gulch, Copper Bowl, Copper Trail, Silver Bell and Deer Park (NFS and private lands)

In 1998 the original Ruthie's chairlift was replaced with a detachable triple chairlift. Since 1998, the Silver Queen Gondola (2005), Ajax Express (2003), and FIS (2004) have all been rebuilt.

With regard to summer recreation, locals and visitors have been accessing Aspen Mountain for summer recreation opportunities long before the first lifts were installed. This is primarily because the Aspen Mountain Summer Road, which was originally constructed in the 1890s during the mining era, has always been a County Road accessible to the general public. As a County Road, the Aspen Mountain Summer Road provides general public access to the mountainous areas south of the SUP area along Richmond Ridge and beyond.

Historic hiking trails, such as the Ute Trail, have also existed for many decades and provide hiking access to the upper reaches of Aspen Mountain.

Since the 1987 installation of the Silver Queen Gondola, ASC has offered sight-seeing opportunities to summer visitors via the gondola. Summer ridership has averaged approximately 70,000 riders each summer season, with operations that begin with the Memorial Day weekend and last through late September.

In an effort to offer more activities for guests, ASC has added the following activities as part of its summer offerings, most of which exist on private lands on the Aspen Mountain summit:

- Food and beverage offerings at the Sundeck Restaurant (private lands)
- Children's play areas with natural looking facilities and nature based activities (NFS and private lands)
- Disc golf (NFS and private lands)
- Naturalist tours (NFS and private lands)
- Special events including weddings, concerts, private parties, worship services and other group/social events (NFS and private lands)



E. PAST PLANNING AND ENVIRONMENTAL DOCUMENTATION

Since its inception, Aspen Mountain has undergone several iterations of planning, as well as numerous environmental analyses and County approval processes for site-specific project proposals. The following list provides a summary of these planning and analysis phases:

- 1946 – Forest Service issues original permit authorizing skiing on Aspen Mountain
- 1961 – Forest Service reissues SUP for another thirty years
- 1984 – Pitkin County creates SKI-REC Zone District to better define Land Use for lands within the ski area
- 1985 – The Pitkin County BOCC approves and the Forest Service “accepts” the 1987 Aspen Mountain Master Plan which identified several significant lift upgrades
- 1987 – The Pitkin County BOCC approves the Aspen Mountain Master Plan amendment to the construction of the 25,000-square foot Sundeck Restaurant
- 1994 – Forest Service issues the Outfitter/ Guide Permit authorizing ASC to operate Aspen Mountain Powder Tours on the backside of Aspen Mountain
- 1996 – Pitkin County adopts the Rural and Remote Zone District for the lands on Richmond Ridge immediately to the south of Aspen Mountain
- 1999 – ASC creates a Natural Resource Management Plan for Aspen Mountain
- 2000 – Forest Service reissues SUP expiring in 2038
- 2004 – Pitkin County approves the Mountain Master Plan Amendment authorizing the construction of the Gent's Ridge Snowmaking Storage Pond
- 2011 – EA completed and DN/FONSI issued authorizing Aspen Skiing Company Forest Health Projects
- 2015 – Forest Service issues the DM that authorizes the replacement/realignment of Lift 1A (Shadow Mountain)



F. VISION AND DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Clarifying a vision and design philosophy is essential in the mountain planning process, as it helps to establish an overall theme and direction for all projects. Aspen Mountain has always provided a high-quality experience for guests in a way that develops awareness and appreciation of the mountain environment, the compelling terrain and the incredible natural resources that are found within and surrounding the resort. The overarching vision of this MDP is to refine and enhance these experiences in a way that allows Aspen Mountain to continue to serve a varied range of international, national, and regional guests as a world-renowned resort, while remaining true to its local character as a fixture within and adjacent to the City of Aspen.

This MDP seeks to proactively address future trends in winter recreation on Aspen Mountain over the next ten to fifteen years as winter recreation on Aspen Mountain is the primary reason the resort maintains its world class reputation as a premier destination for guests. Understanding that guests' preferences are constantly changing, this MDP will provide ASC, the Forest Service, Pitkin County and the City of Aspen with preparedness and creativity in meeting future guest demands. By so doing, the plan will reinforce the values of the Aspen community, the business objectives of ASC, and the natural resource and recreational goals of the WRNF.

Recognizing that the demand for summer recreation is growing and diversifying in mountain resort communities across the country, this plan also seeks to address these trends head-on. Summer recreational opportunities popular in mountain resort communities have evolved in the past several years beyond "traditional" activities, such as hunting, fishing and camping, to include a considerable variety of activities that allow guests to experience the natural environment while still feeling comfortable in their surroundings. Activities ranging from mountain biking, navigating challenge courses and playing disc golf, to other less strenuous outdoor recreation and experiences will allow visitors to engage with and experience the natural environment in a comfortable yet fulfilling way. NFS lands managed under ski area SUPs are well-situated to provide these

forms of recreation due to the ski areas' existing infrastructure, base area facilities, and dedicated staffing. The ASC development philosophy is to provide a sense of adventure and interaction with the setting while eliminating some of the barriers that often prevent guests (particularly families, the elderly/aging or those with disabilities) from participating in outdoor recreational activities and encountering the natural environment directly.

Consistent with SAREOA (see Chapter II), planned projects and activities have been designed to harmonize with the natural environment to heighten the user's experience with their natural surroundings on the WRNF.

G. STATEMENT OF GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

1. *Winter*

a. Winter Goals

- Capitalize and improve upon the iconic world-class reputation of Aspen Mountain, with consideration of its proximity to downtown Aspen, its racing heritage and its passionately loyal local following to ensure that the Aspen Mountain experience will truly remain one of a kind. Continue to improve the physical and functional relationship between the mountain, on-mountain facilities and the community, enhancing visitor circulation, guest amenities, and lift planning.
- Continue to enhance the natural character of the mountain terrain by improving skier flow, lift planning, and access to the varied and unique terrain the mountain offers.
- Create a quality working environment for staff who will, in turn, seek to provide consistent outstanding service.
- Strive to maintain Aspen Mountain's position of leadership in the marketplace.
- Provide financial viability for capital improvements and investments in the mountain.

b. Winter Objectives

- Develop the Pandora terrain pod to significantly enhance an already unique winter experience.
- Ensure top-to-bottom early season skiing in spite of the probable effects of climate change.
- Enhance the existing terrain access and efficient user flow by adding and/or modifying existing lift systems and trails.
- Enhance and improve the on-mountain dining experience by modernizing and refurbishing aging facilities.
- Maintain world-wide exposure with an enhanced World Cup ski racing venue.
- Maintain regional and millennial generational exposure with enhanced free-ride events and activities.
- Expand overall winter activity offerings as guest expectations warrant and new technologies become available to expand the range and enjoyment of winter experiences.

2. **Summer**

a. Summer Goals

- Promote educational and interpretive opportunities through the development of interactive and adventurous natural resource-based recreational opportunities.
- Provide a wide array of activities that encourage summer visitors to explore the National Forest in a more complete way.
- Develop activities on NFS and private lands that introduce visitors to the mountain environment without requiring specialized skill or knowledge. Strengthen the overall year-round economy for individuals and the community.

b. Summer Objectives

- Continue to restore, maintain and enhance the alpine landscape.
- Enhance the existing mountain top activities and guest offerings to engage visitors more fully for longer periods of time in the high-altitude surroundings and environment.

- Enhance hiking opportunities to provide more varied options and levels of difficulty.
- Build, provide and/or enhance mountain bike trails.
- Enhance Aspen Mountain as a scenic destination by providing viewpoints that are immediately or easily reached by short walks or hikes from lifts and other accessible locations for the public, including less active or physically-able visitors.

These Goals and Objectives are consistent with, and manifest the mission stated within, ASC's Guiding Principles:

- ♦ **Be fair and understanding; treat everyone with courtesy and respect**
- ♦ **Communicate honestly, openly and often**
- ♦ **Share a passion for excellence**
- ♦ **Engage as responsible citizens of our community**
- ♦ **Ensure our financial success**

ASC staff is dedicated to the *Aspen Idea* and its core principles of humanity, excellence, sustainability and passion.



H. ACCEPTANCE BY THE FOREST SERVICE

This MDP is the result of an iterative and collaborative process between ASC and Forest Service staff. Forest Service “acceptance” is consistent with the requirements of the Aspen Mountain SUP and the 2002 Forest Plan. This MDP will also undergo analysis and review by the City of Aspen and Pitkin County, as necessary to ensure that the goals and objectives presented herein are consistent with those of all other agencies with jurisdiction over the facilities Aspen Mountain.

Note that Forest Service acceptance of this MDP does not imply authorization to proceed with any of the projects identified herein. None of the projects identified in this MDP have been reviewed or approved under the requirements of the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and all will require site-specific analyses before a decision can be made, or any projects are approved. Site-specific environmental analysis may result in a modification to planned projects. Furthermore, beyond NEPA analysis, implementation of projects identified in this MDP may be dependent upon post-NEPA approval of independent project proposals or detailed plans contained in Aspen Mountain’s annual operations/construction plans.

I. REVIEW BY PITKIN COUNTY AND THE GENERAL PUBLIC

Because the area included within the Aspen Mountain SUP Boundary physically exists within Pitkin County, a Land Use Approval review process will be required by Pitkin County to ensure compliance with the Pitkin County Code, including adoption of a Mountain Master Plan Amendment. This process will require Public Notice and public meetings held by the Pitkin County Planning Commission and the BOCC, allowing opportunity for public comment and local review concerning all aspects of this MDP.

This review process by Pitkin County will comply with the Forest Service requirements to publicly share the vision, goals and objectives of the resort to seek a community understanding of the plan presented here.

FIGURE I-1
VICINITY MAP

ASPEN SNOWMASS

ASPEN MOUNTAIN MASTER DEVELOPMENT PLAN



