

THE RESORT BASE AREAS

As one enters Girdwood, Mount Alyeska is hard to ignore. Standing like a monumental homing beacon on axis with Alyeska Highway, it fairly demands that those who live at its feet actively engage it. Along with its other majestic Chugach neighbors, it symbolizes the physical elements that dominate Girdwood's wildland identity. Its magnetic pull is the force that governs the interplay between resort and community.

Mount Alyeska first began to attract local skiers in the mid-1950's, when a rope tow and a small ski slope were installed (1956). The Alyeska Ski Corporation was formed in 1957-58, and the new company forged ahead with construction of its first chairlift and a day lodge (1960). In the following decade, the company operated at a loss, subsidized by a French benefactor, but Girdwood's gradual transformation to a recreation-based community was undeterred. In 1962, the ski company acquired from the state 233 acres of land at the base of Mount Alyeska and developed the Alyeska Subdivision. In 1968, the first 32 rooms of a base area hotel were built by a private developer, but two months after the grand opening in February 1969, an avalanche nearly flattened the project. The planned second phase was scrapped, and condominiums were built instead. In the 1970's, four new chairlifts were added, along with the Skyride Restaurant at the top of the lift and lighting for night skiing.

In 1980, Seibu Alaska, Inc., a subsidiary of a major international operator and



*Fig. 11-1
View toward
Mt. Alyeska
from Highway*

developer of hotel and recreational properties (the Seibu Group of Japan), purchased the ski area. In 1985, Seibu prepared a master plan for resort expansion and, based on the plan, was granted approval to purchase 80 acres of land from the Heritage Land Bank and to lease some 30 more. The Municipality approved the master plan in 1987, permitting construction to begin on the first phase of the expanded resort. The 307-room Alyeska Prince Hotel opened in 1994, along with a new tramway and chairlift system and a new parking area in the flats below the hotel. Seibu also constructed a new day lodge in the old base area. The master plan for Alyeska Resort calls for a second phase that includes an additional 500-700 hotel rooms and another 250-350 "resort bedroom units" on two nearby parcels.



Fig. 11-2 The Old Resort Base

About a mile removed from Alyeska's original base area on an extension of Arlberg Road, the new resort base, anchored by the hotel, is the magnet for destination visitors. The hotel and the ski lifts, strung like necklaces up the flanks of Mount Alyeska, may be the most visible evidence of the bond between Girdwood and the mountain. The new base, however, has not supplanted the old base area as the ski portal for the community. In its dotage, dated and poorly designed, the old base is a less dramatic – and far less appealing – legacy from the ski area's earlier years as a struggling amenity in a very small town. Today, with the community poised to grow in both population and visitors, there is a widely acknowledged need for improvements in the old base area and stronger connections with the new one.

Fig. 11-3 The New Resort Base (Alyeska Prince Hotel)



THE OLD RESORT BASE

The old resort base is an assemblage of mixed and disconnected parts. The day lodge and the day skier parking lots adjacent to it seem only tenuously related to the lodging, condos and retail shops constructed at the base in earlier years. In between the two mini-nodes is a scattering of independent retail shops that do not have the strength to bind the whole together. Undefined and unpaved roadways and parking areas consume a considerably larger area than might be necessary if circulation were clarified and parking areas more efficiently laid out.

COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES FOR THE OLD RESORT BASE

The desire for a solution to these problems is reflected in the objectives for the area that have evolved from public meetings early in the master planning process. Because the base area is on private property, it is difficult to identify any specific improvements that the public sector can undertake to improve it. The general objectives outlined below are intended to provide some guidance to Alyeska Resort about community intent as the company considers its own strategies to upgrade its facilities in the old base area.

- Reinforce the old base area as the in-town portal to the ski mountain. Let it continue to serve as the primary day skier and beginner skier node. Do not replicate functions at the new resort base that would eclipse the old one.
- Strengthen pedestrian connectivity between facilities within the old base area.
- Integrate the old base more effectively into the community-wide pedestrian and vehicular circulation system to provide an intermediate destination between the new townsite and the new resort base and to help strengthen the connection between them.

- Achieve greater year-round utilization of base area facilities and a higher level of activity in the old base generally.
- Diversify and strengthen visitor-serving retail activity.

FACTORS THAT WILL INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENT

- *Avalanche hazard.* Virtually the entire old base area is exposed to moderate to severe avalanche hazard (see Map 15). Presumably the day lodge, which is the newest of the buildings at the base, was designed with that in mind. The day skier parking area is at high risk and therefore unsuited for any other use. Any redevelopment of the old hotel and condos should incorporate hazard mitigation to deflect avalanche run-out.
- *Flood hazard.* Alyeska Creek flows through the Olympic Circle area and has occasionally threatened the area with flooding. Although the 100-year flood limits of the creek have not yet been mapped, redevelopment planning in the base area needs to incorporate a study of how to mitigate the flood risk and how the creek might become a natural amenity at the same time.
- *Topography.* There is a significant uphill grade from the intersection of Arlberg and Olympic Circle to the Bake Shop that severely hampers circulation and parking in that area. It will be difficult to fix the problem in any integrated way until the hotel and attached condominiums are redeveloped. However, some reorganization of parking, driving lanes, and pedestrian circulation should be studied to reduce the severity of the problem in the near term.
- *Roadway configuration and vehicular access.* None of the facilities in the old base area is easily accessed by



car. The routes that access them are circuitous and do not follow view lines. Directional signage is not entirely clear or easily visible from the road. The three-way T-intersection at the upper end of Alyeska Highway causes congestion and confusion in peak ski season periods. Some of these conditions can be improved, but the basic configuration of the roadway system – in particular the T-intersection, would be extremely difficult, if not impossible to change.

- *Condominium ownership.* In a wing attached to the original hotel building, numerous individuals own condominium units above the Bake Shop and an odd assortment of other, less successful retail shops. The area just north of the hotel, around Olympic Circle, is also predominantly condominiums. Efforts in other resort communities to encourage redevelopment of outdated condominium buildings have been prolonged, often contentious, and sometimes blocked entirely by a few owners. The ability of condo owners in the old base to cooperate in upgrading their properties and to work with the resort on comprehensive remedies for circulation and parking problems will determine whether more than superficial improvement can be achieved.

Fig. 11-4
Independent retail shops are scattered between the day lodge and Olympic Circle

APPROPRIATE LAND USES AND DESIRED CHARACTER

In the original base area, the intent of the draft Land Use Regulations reflects the community's endorsement of the existing pattern of development and its desire that the area continue to serve as the base area for day skiers. The draft regulations for the old base (Resort Use District GRST-1) acknowledge that the main focus of development in this area is alpine skiing and tourism. To strengthen the orientation toward visitors, appropriate uses would include bars and restaurants, varied types of lodging, galleries and studios, indoor recreation facilities, sports shops and other retailers. Proposed buildings over 4,000 sq. ft. require a conditional development permit review, but no maximum gross building area is proposed in the draft. Building height is capped at 40 feet, or generally three stories.

In the event that Alyeska Resort is able to forge a cooperative approach to redevelopment with condominium owners in the old base area, the Master Plan recommends that the consolidated development plan go through a master site plan review. This would help to assure that connective systems are in place and that the area retains the small scale that characterizes the district today. When and if older buildings are redeveloped, it is also recommended that roof heights and building masses be varied for greater visual interest and village-like character. Sensitively scaled infill may be as important as reconfigured circulation in uniting the spread-out elements that are currently scattered

Fig. 11-5
Olympic Circle
Parking Lot



across the foot of the mountain (if this can be done with adequate avalanche hazard mitigation).

RECOMMENDED IMPROVEMENTS IN CIRCULATION AND PARKING

The most pressing issue in the old base today may be vehicular circulation and parking (other than day skier parking). The lack of clarity in where to park, where to drive and where to walk is a disincentive to patronize the commercial establishments at the base, especially in winter, when circulation is even more obscured by snow. These steps are recommended as possible remedies:

- Explore ways to facilitate turning movements at the T-intersection in periods of heavy traffic. Many ski resorts utilize employees or local police to direct traffic at busy intersections during skier "rush hours."
- Maintain the large day skier parking lot for that use; also utilize it to support the community's special events. Define pedestrian pathways from the lot to the day lodge that will work in both winter and summer.
- Consider ways to improve the skier drop-off area in front of the daylodge without affecting the flow of cars into the dayskier parking lot. Create a place for people to wait in front of the lodge that is on-grade and kept free of snow.
- Identify a location for an improved shuttle bus stop at the "front door" of the old base area; initiate improved shuttle service between the New Townsite and the hotel, with an intermediate stop at or near the day lodge.
- Ease difficult grades wherever possible by reconfiguring retail parking, roads and driveways on Olympic Circle. To make walking safer, clarify areas for cars and clearly delineate parking and service

areas to separate them from pedestrian walkways.

- Consider ways to modify snow removal procedures in the Olympic Circle area so that pedestrian circulation is not obstructed and parking areas remain clearly defined in winter. It may eventually be necessary to remove snow from the area entirely so as not to lose excessive parking capacity.
- Consider removing the elevated swimming pool in front of the condos in order to create a more generous pedestrian corridor to the day lodge.
- Develop a more distinctive and less circuitous pedestrian connection from the day lodge north to the existing retail shops, the old hotel/condos and beyond. (The existing pedestrian pathways are confusing.) Eventually, this pathway might be extended parallel to Arlberg Road as a forested summer and winter upper traverse to the hotel. It could tie future residential development on the parcel owned by Seibu into the overall pathway network.
- Improve directional signage along all pedestrian paths.
- Create a more visible landmark at the terminus of the view up Alyeska Highway.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE COMMERCIAL ACTIVITY

- Encourage retailers to improve their storefronts, shop signage, site and store window lighting and merchandise displays, and pedestrian access to stores from parking areas. More clearly identify the primary entries to stores.
- Develop an aggressive program of summer and winter activities, special events, community gatherings and

shoulder-season conferences in the day lodge.

- Create outdoor public spaces around the day lodge that can be used in summer (and possibly winter, if in a sheltered location) for outdoor events and informal gathering. Utilize interior food service areas in the building to support outdoor functions.
- Work with condo owners to evaluate redevelopment alternatives for the old hotel and the condo wing. At the least, improve the year-round visibility of and access to retail shops in the building.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

- The same commercial design guidelines in the draft land use regulations that apply to the New Townsite also apply to the old base area. Provisions that will be particularly important for the old base are:
- Architectural styling and materials that reflect the area’s history and are appropriate for the regional climate.
- Architectural elements and site amenities that offer protection from the elements in winter: covered walkways and steps, roofs that do not shed snow on pedestrian areas, arctic entries, gradual grade changes, ample snow storage areas out of the way of pedestrian circulation, etc.

*Fig. 11-6
Ground floor retail shops below the condos suffer from poor visibility and lack of access*





Fig. 11-7
Marginal pedestrian connections get worse during the winter in the Old Base

- Building masses organized to appear as an arrangement of smaller connected structures.
- Special attention to the detailing of windows, doorways, arcades and protected entries on the ground floor.
- Retail storefronts organized to display merchandise in visible and attractive ways: ample window area, bay windows, recessed doorways, etc.
- Site grading that mimics natural landforms and facilitates accessibility.
- Walkways connecting all buildings, well defined to separate pedestrian areas from vehicular circulation or parking areas.
- Parking areas that have clear boundaries to separate them from pedestrian pathways and landscaped areas.
- Service areas sited away from actively used areas and screened from view.

THE NEW RESORT BASE

The area known as the New Resort Base today consists of a landmark hotel, the Alyeska Prince, and surrounding undeveloped land owned by a single entity, the Alyeska Resort Corp. The hotel is only a mile or so away from the New Girdwood Townsite, but its apparent

isolation from the town center makes it seem like an island unto itself. Although the resort is generally well regarded as an asset to Girdwood, it is sometimes perceived as a less effective economic generator than it actually is because hotel guests rarely have the time (or the transportation) to visit other destinations in town during their brief stays.

COMMUNITY OBJECTIVES FOR THE NEW RESORT BASE

Anticipating the resort company's intention to more than double the current bed base of the complex, community goals focus on the desire to strengthen both the connections and the symbiotic relationship between the resort and the commercial areas in town. *The underlying objective is to enhance the potential for synergy between the community and the resort: More interesting destinations in the town's commercial areas will strengthen the resort's appeal as a year-round destination; likewise, more guests and higher occupancy rates year-round will benefit the town's economic base.*

Specific objectives for the New Resort Base are to:

- *Continue to grow as a high quality visitor-oriented destination resort facility.*
- Expand the visitor bed base with a greater variety of accommodations.
- Strengthen pedestrian and transit connections to the New Townsite.
- Add recreational attractions and meeting facilities to support conference business in order to increase four-season activity.
- Increase the variety of retail shops, services and activities for guests.

FACTORS THAT WILL INFLUENCE DEVELOPMENT

The resort's ability to expand its facilities and its bed base will depend heavily on the extent to which Girdwood Valley matures as a destination with multiple activities and year-round attractions. In particular, these factors will be influential:

- *Ski expansion:* Future development of the Glacier-Winner Creek ski expansion.
- *Golf Course/Nordic Ski:* The completion of these new facilities will add new variety to the recreational opportunities in the valley
- *Regional transit:* Extension of the rail spur.
- *Tourism:* Trends in packaged tours and the ability of the hotel to attract some of the growing number of vacationers in Alaska on group tours and cruises.
- *Strategic tourism:* Girdwood's ability to develop low-impact, environmentally based attractions (nature tours, back-country and Nordic skiing, wildlife viewing, etc.) and to market itself to active independent visitors.
- *Availability of investment capital:* Hotel investors and financing mechanisms for resort lodging hold considerable power to influence development programs and outcomes.
- *Commercial area development:* The pace, character, and variety of commercial and retail development in the New Townsite, both north and south of the highway, will, over time, contribute in important ways to the ability of the resort to entice more visitors for longer stays.



APPROPRIATE LAND USES AND DESIRED CHARACTER

Fig. 11-8
View of the hotel
and the New Base
from the Tram

The intent of the draft land use code is to encourage a continuation and expansion of the present development pattern, targeted at alpine skiers and destination resort guest, in the area anchored by the hotel. Prior to any development in the New Resort Base, a master development plan review is required in which specific land uses, development programs, building design, site plans, and internal circulation systems will be scrutinized. The development standards listed in the draft regulations for this district (GRST-2, New Base Resort) - i.e. setbacks, driveways and the like - are largely irrelevant for a development of the magnitude that could potentially be considered by the resort company. There is no maximum gross building area in this district, and building height is capped at 75 feet (approximately five stories plus a pitched roof).

RECOMMENDED CIRCULATION IMPROVEMENTS

Alyeska Resort is encouraged to:

- Create a multimodal center at the resort that facilitates circulation connections between the tram, tour buses, the proposed internal bus service, regional trails and a future rail link.
- Develop a secondary “front door” at the multimodal center to receive guests arriving by transit. Improve interior connections in order that visitors arriving by transit or tram, but not staying at the hotel, feel welcome in the hotel’s facilities and retail shops.

The resort is also encouraged to:

- Connect future phases of the hotel complex to the existing hotel, the tram, and community transit services with weather-protected pedestrian pathways.
- Work with the community to establish and operate a more frequent shuttle service to connect the hotel to the New Townsite.

RECOMMENDATIONS TO INCREASE ACTIVITY AT THE RESORT

There are a number of steps Alyeska Resort might consider in order to increase the level of visitor activity and strengthen the resort’s appeal as a destination. Some of the recommendations below are dependent on an increase in occupancy rates, but also may help occupancy to grow.

- As occupancy rates rise, increase the amount and variety of retail space, and put it in more visible locations.
- Increase the variety of food and beverage opportunities.

- Strengthen summer retail.
- Create additional indoor and outdoor public spaces on the hotel grounds that take advantage of the natural landscape and southern sun exposure. Develop an ongoing program of seasonal activities and events that utilize outdoor amenities.
- Offer programs and activity packages for local residents and school kids.
- Work with other recreation and activity providers in the community to market off-site excursions for guests (“base-camp tourism”).
- Increase the services available for business and conference guests.

DESIGN GUIDELINES

The same draft design guidelines apply to both the new and the old resort base areas (as well as to Girdwood’s commercial areas generally). In the New Base Area, however, the guidelines pertaining to site planning and circulation infrastructure will be as critical to overall quality as those pertaining to the buildings themselves because the natural landscape is so critical to the resort’s image. Guidelines in the draft regulations that relate to the organization of building elements, building massing, variation in rooflines and facades, will be essential in controlling the apparent scale of new buildings in the resort’s expansion area and could be more important in this district than in any other commercial area.

The design of pedestrian-oriented mixed-use resort complexes (which is what the resort ultimately aspires to be) is an undertaking that requires unusual sensitivity to spatial qualities, scale at the ground floor level, views, microclimate, relationships between indoor and outdoor space, and potential for synergy between uses. Design guidelines are not enough to assure that a development plan will achieve these qualities. Therefore, professional assistance may be helpful to the Municipality during the master plan review process.