

# **Ski resorts plan for 'very different' season**

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Safety measures will be in place on, around the slopes

HARBOR SPRINGS - For Northern Michigan's ski areas, some level of uncertainty typically accompanies the preparations for each snowsports' season - such as the question of when Mother Nature will provide the wintry weather conditions needed to establish a base of snow.

This year, these businesses face additional, potentially tricky considerations posed by a viral pandemic, one which has shown ups and downs in the numbers of new cases since the COVID-19 outbreak reached Michigan late last winter. But after several of the area's ski properties cut their 2019-20 seasons a bit short as a result of the mounting public health concerns, operators say they've been working with others in the industry to adapt and develop protocols for safe operation.

"There's been a lot of cooperation among ski areas both at the national and state level," said Ben Doornbos, general manager of Nub's Nob Ski Area near Harbor Springs.

Managers tend to see skiing itself as an activity which likely can ramp up for 2020-21 without much in the way of disruptions for participants. But as at many other types of business and public gathering areas, they anticipate visitors will find an assortment of new measures designed to limit potential for coronavirus spread as they prepare to hit the slopes and wind down afterward.

"One thing we know for sure: the winter of 2021 will be very different," said Mike Chumbler, president and general manager of Boyne Highlands near Harbor Springs. "That doesn't mean there can't be a winter, so for that we're very thankful."

### **Making plans**

The National Ski Areas Association trade group's "Ski Well, Be Well" document identifies an assortment of best practices for snow-



sports properties to follow in an effort to reduce COVID-19 transmission risks.

As the organization sees it, skiing by its nature shows potential to mesh well with common coronavirus precautions in several ways.

Once underfoot, the dimensions of skis or a snowboard can help users in establishing the typical 6-foot social distancing interval from others who are waiting ahead of or behind them for a lift ride. Even before state officials and public health agencies began calling for face covering use as a means to help prevent coronavirus spread, skiers routinely wore these to combat the chilly conditions associated with their pastime. Furthermore, skiing is an activity that's typically pursued in spacious outdoor expanses with plenty of fresh air.

"Similar to golf, this sport kind of naturally distances people," said Kevin McKinley, assistant general manager at Treetops Resort near Gaylord, which offers venues for both pastimes.

At the same time, the National Ski Areas Association urges ski operators to follow protocols for loading lifts that avoid close contact between members of different ski parties, to follow cleaning and disinfection strategies in all areas of their operations and to clearly communicate public health plans and requirements to visitors.

The Michigan Snowsports Industries Association is among the state-level trade groups to have endorsed the nationwide organization's set of best practices. Mickey MacWilliams, executive director of the Michigan group, said it has drawn upon such resources and enlisted representatives from some of the state's ski areas to help develop protocols for its members to operate amid COVID-19. Along the way, Mac-Williams said the association has established contact with the Michigan Department of Natural Resources' Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry, and aims to reach agreement this fall with state officials on a workable operating framework.

"This is what we're hoping is the way we can work tog to keep outdoor recreation open," MacWilliams said. "What we're trying to do is be as safe as we possibly can."

In an email, DNR Office of Outdoor Recreation Industry director Brad Garmon said he's been in contact with snowsports industry representatives as they've formulated potential safety protocols, but he's not yet sure what direction the governor's office ultimately will take when it comes to policies for ski areas' operation amid COVID-19.

Given the evolving nature of the pandemic, Boyne Highlands' Chumbler expects ski operators will need to remain nimble in the upcoming season in case of changing public health directives.

### **While outdoors**

For the outdoor portions of ski and snowboard outings, several ski area managers anticipate some of the most noticeable changes resulting from COVID-19 precautions will be found while waiting to board ski lifts and riding them up the slopes, with face covering use likely required at such times.

From one ski area to another, managers anticipate a variety of measures to promote social distancing as lifts are boarded - whether by limiting use of a given chair to members of a single ski party, leaving empty seats between members of different groups or at least fulfilling requests to be seated separately from other parties.

Although the measurements of skis and snowboards can help in establishing front-to-back social distancing in lift lines, Boyne Mountain Resort food and beverage director Mike Doumanian said that property in Boyne Falls and others may need to reconfigure their lift queues in order to provide side-to-side spacing.

Several recent news reports from the western United States indicate some of that region's high-profile ski resorts are planning to put requirements for lift reservations in place - and eliminate walk-in ticket sales - in response to COVID-19 concerns.

At the Michigan Snowsports Industries Association, MacWilliams sees this reservations approach as something that potentially could be a necessity for at least some Michigan ski areas. Managers of at least two Northern Michigan ski areas, though, don't see the need for this as very probable.

Nub's Nob's Doornbos said Midwestern ski areas don't often see the combination of large crowds and limited lift availability that sometimes lead to long lines at properties out west. Similarly, across Pleasantview Road at Boyne Highlands, Chumbler expects the outdoor layout and lift capacities are spacious enough to handle typical crowds without a likely need for mandatory reservations.

"The pinch points and tough spots, we imagine, will be indoors," he said.

## **Crowd control**

In their offices, food and beverage service areas and indoor gathering spaces, ski properties have the same sorts of public health considerations to follow - seating capacity limitations, mask and social distancing requirements and deep-cleaning of guest rooms if lodging is offered - as at other categories of businesses. As the season approaches, managers are looking for ways to moderate crowd sizes at peak visitation times.

At Boyne Mountain, for example, "We're going through each of our locker or warming areas and making signs based on their capacity," Doumanian said.

Doumanian also anticipates the resort will ask guests to follow specific directional routing through some indoor areas to limit close contacts. With less group business expected during the pandemic than in other recent winters, he sees potential to use rooms typically used for private gatherings to help make up for dining capacity restrictions - and added Boyne Mountain also plans to expand outdoor seating and play up outdoor food and drink service options.

Seeing potential for demand to outstrip some indoor gathering areas' capacity at peak times, Doornbos said Nub's also aims to offer appealing outdoor alternatives - for example, by upgrading a patio overlooking the slopes to create a "winter garden" area, with a fireplace and adjacent food and beverage service windows.

Some ski areas also hope to limit crowds in high-traffic areas by encouraging advance ticket purchases and service bookings via apps and websites.

"What we're trying to do is leverage e-commerce," Chumbler said. At Treetops, McKinley anticipates reconfiguring the rental area to limit formation of lines indoors, and encouraging guests to contact the resort with details such as height, weight and ski experience level beforehand to allow for quick on-site processing. For similar reasons, he said the resort plans to promote advance bookings of ski lessons.

Staff at another Gaylord-area ski property, the Otsego Resort, did not respond to messages seeking details on how operations might be adapted amid the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **Business prospects**

Several of the region's ski areas have season passes for 2020-21 on sale, with some managers indicating the pre-season sales pace is comparable to - if not ahead of - other recent years.

At Nubs, "so far, interest is very strong," Doornbos said. "What we've heard from people (is) ... that skiing is something for them to look forward to when so much else in their lives has been canceled."

Amid the uncertainties associated with the virus, MacWilliams at the Michigan Snowsports Industries Association sees some potential for the state's ski areas to draw Midwestern patrons who might otherwise plan ski outings to other parts of the country or world. Given strong recent sales trends for equipment such as bicycles, snowshoes and cross-country skis, she sees another potentially encouraging sign for downhill ski venues.

"People are really looking outside for ways to recreate," she said.