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GREAT WHITTIER HOPE.

WILL A NEW RESORT
NEAR NEW DENVER,
BRITISH COLUMBIA,
SAVE THE TOWN,
OR WRECK IT?



The new gold.

FROM THE MOUNTAINTOPS

it looks like an inland sea. Valley fog rolls up B.C.'s Slokan Lake and floods the foot of the Goat Range with winter mist. Mount Brennan and Whitewater Mountain penetrate the veil the highest, poking the sky in the middle of its big blue belly, just shy of 2,900 metres. These twin peaks match the grandeur of those farther north, where the busy Trans-Canada Highway cuts through similar stands of towering sediment. But here in the midriff of the greater Selkirk Mountains, isolated by evergreen jungles and nebulous waterways, it's uncannily quiet. There's little traffic on the winding stretch of broken tarmac called Highway 31A.

If New Denver resident David Harley gets his way, though, this will change. Harley has proposed a hybrid backcountry ski resort here he says will restore the withering locale to the boom times of yesteryear, when it was a bustling mining district. If he gets a government go-ahead and finds investors, chairlifts will forever transform this locals-only ski-touring haunt into one accessible to leagues of skiers from around the world.



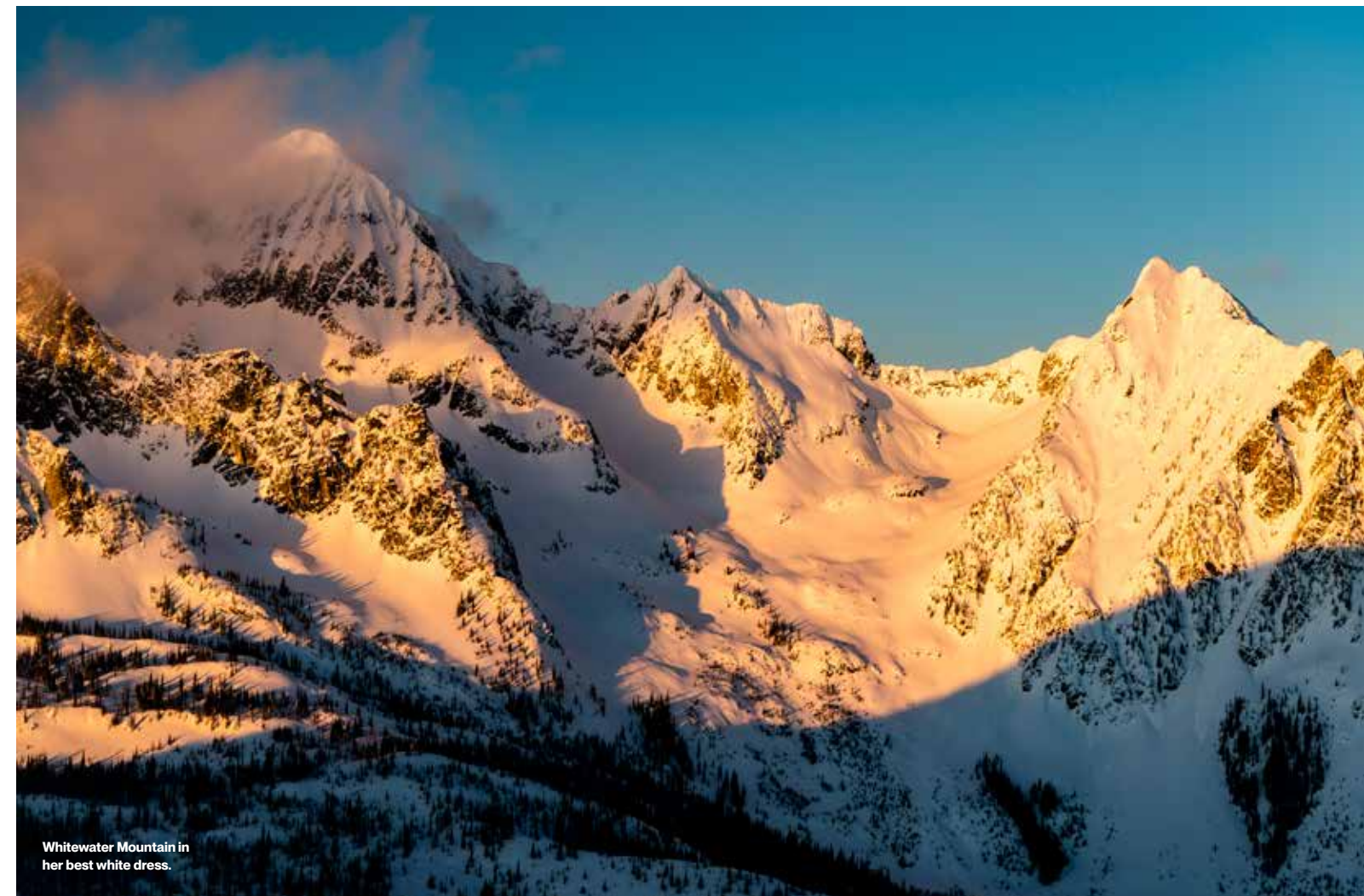
Sense of direction.



Uphill battle.

Harley is evangelical that Zincton—as the resort would be called, in homage to a mineral once abundant here—will “save” the tiny town of New Denver from years of economic isolation and decline. To its 400 or so residents, who could soon lose their hospital, this proposal should sound like a godsend. And to some it does. But amongst those most opposed to it, curiously, are skiers. That’s because the ones here (some for multiple generations now) came to escape the non-stop engines of ski towns.

For those who prefer peaceful, unfiltered nature, along with affordability, the resort industry’s indelible mark on the places it lands has not always been a good one. Many in this little pocket of B.C. are leery of the irreversible environmental and cultural shift such a development would bring to their humble West Kootenay hideout. Zincton, then, begs many bigger questions about the tracks we skiers leave behind, and who has the right to put them there.



Whitewater Mountain in her best white dress.



Chris Rubens examining bold claims.

SKI-AREA DEVELOPMENTS CAN BE LIKE A GOLD RUSH. AS PLACES LIKE WHISTLER, REVELSTOKE AND GOLDEN BLOW OUT, THOSE YOUNG FOLKS NOT YET ESTABLISHED CHASE NEW CLAIMS.

“IT’S SICK!” Chris Rubens exclaims, buzzing from the succession of 500-metre, thigh-deep runs he just bagged with minimal skinning between laps. The contours of London Ridge link up so well it puts the famed Rogers Pass between Golden and Revelstoke, B.C., with its hours-long approaches, almost to shame. “We think we have good tree skiing in Revelstoke, but then you come to the Kootenays and you’re like, ‘Holy shit, it’s way better,’” he emphasizes.

Increasingly, this is his favourite kind of terrain: deep, pillowy, treed and free of the complications big alpine brings—even though there is some of that here. But really, this area is renowned for its magical forests and friendly ridgelines. With 14 metres of annual snowfall, it’s Canada’s answer to Japan if ever there was one. That the skiing is unreal is the one thing everyone can agree on, and the whole reason there’s anything to argue over. For Leah Evans and Andreas Massitti, who are also here from Revelstoke, the terrain and snow are equally mind-boggling. That’s saying a lot considering the promised land they hail from. But it’s one that fewer people are able to partake in each year as it gets busier and pricier.

Ski-area developments can be like a gold rush. As places like Whistler, Revelstoke and Golden blow out, those young folks not yet established chase new claims. Resort proposals in cheap backwater towns are a rare chance to “get in” early. They can offer decades of dreamy, crowd-free skiing and affordable housing. For a time.

“I moved to Revelstoke the year before the resort opened,” Rubens recalls. “From my point of view it definitely has changed [the town] for the better. The resort brought young energy in, and kids were just trying to get there. And now kids are trying to stay there, and that’s kind of the problem—it’s so expensive. So, you know, development has its pluses and minuses. And there’s no doubt that putting a resort here will change the area forever.”



Leah Evans sifting for silver.

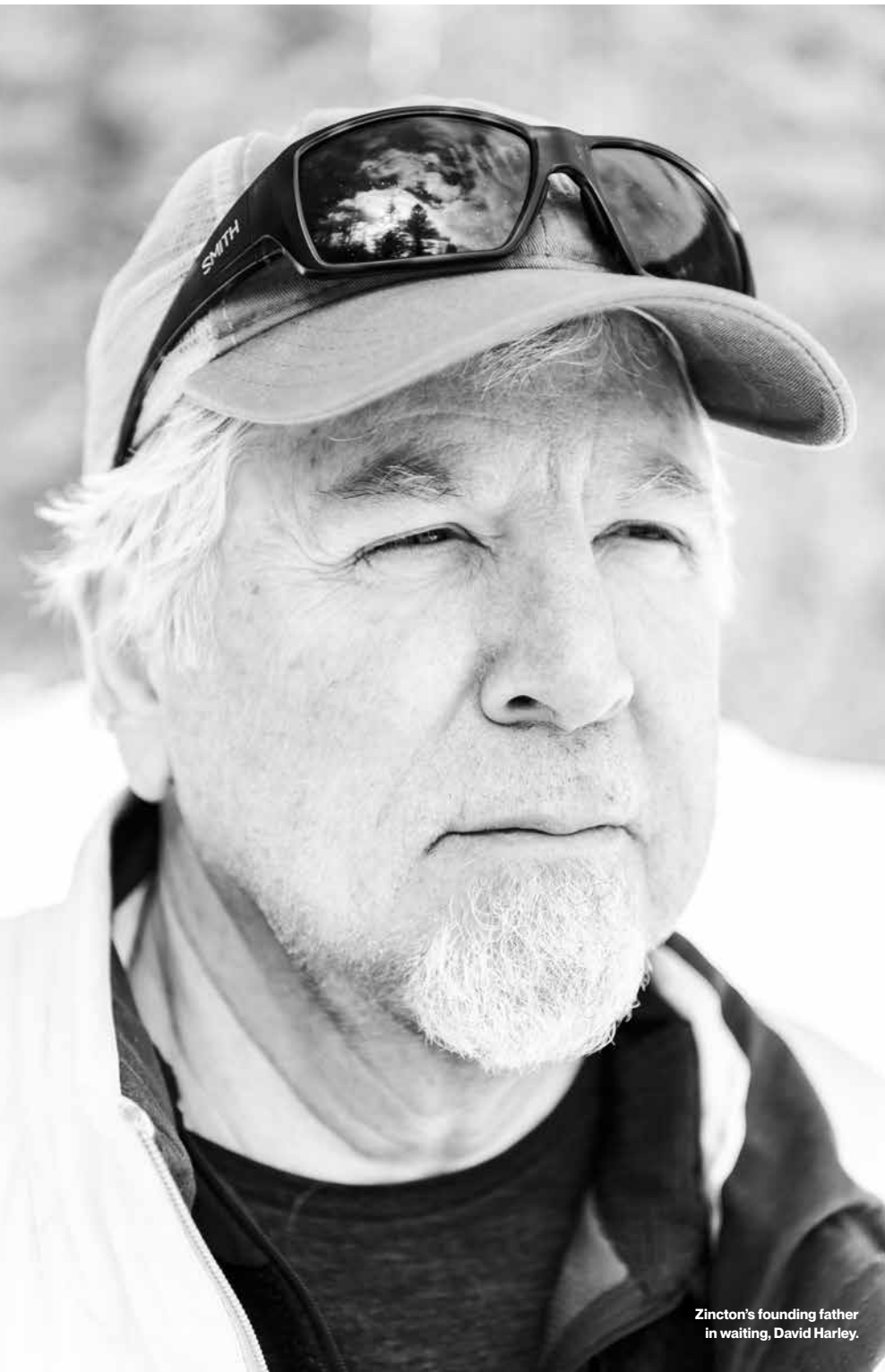


What dreams are made of.



Andreas Massitti powder prospecting.

“NEW DENVER AND SILVERTON HAVE SEEN DRAMATIC POPULATION DECLINES. YOU JUST HAVE TO LOOK AT STATS CANADA TO SEE WHAT’S HAPPENING TO THE AVERAGE AGE HERE—IT’S OVER 70 NOW. LIKE, THIS IS POVERTY-VILLE.”



Zincton's founding father in waiting, David Harley.

HARLEY, AT HEART, is a gentlemanly, silver-haired ski bum. Despite his business successes, he still drives a battered old Honda CRV, and is nostalgic about his humble beginnings. He started out hand sewing Gore-Tex jackets from his garage in his hometown of Vernon, B.C., before founding the thriving apparel company Far West. But as that business skyrocketed, he faced the crossroads of moving to Hong Kong or Mexico to oversee production, or divest and do something different.

“The worst decision of my life was not buying real estate in Telluride [Colorado] when I was there in '75,” he says pointedly. “You could buy any house on Colorado Avenue for five grand back then, and I didn't. And then the second worst financial decision of my life was going public [with Far West] in 1986 on the TSE, because then you have a board of directors and a bunch of guys in suits that start telling you how to run your company.”

In 2004, when it all got too big, he got out, then moved to New Denver with his wife and two youngest kids. It was a place he knew from backcountry skiing trips. Once there, he started the Valhalla Pure Outfitters retail franchise. Today, there are 12 locations across B.C., and the brand is synonymous with quality outdoor gear. And while that sounds like a fairytale ending to a corporate escape, there's still one big problem making it hard to enjoy his nest egg.

“New Denver and Silverton have seen dramatic population declines,” he explains, gravely. “You just have to look at Stats Canada to see what's happening to the average age here—it's over 70 now. Like, this is poverty-ville. When half your population is over 70 and nobody's making any money there's no rink, no rec center, no swimming pool, no skateboard park, no pump track. I mean, when I came here in the '70s there were 1,200 people. There were 40 guys sitting at the gas station waiting to get in the bus to go up and work the mines at Sandon, and now we're down to 400 people. We're not sustainable, these towns are going to die unless we can figure out another way.”



Boom and doom.



Valhalla Pure.



Adventure Domes.



Beauty and the busted.

FOR HARLEY, that way is Zincton All-Seasons Resort. His vision entails a one-of-a-kind, purpose-built slackcountry ski resort where most of the terrain would require skinning to, but would still be within the resort's operational boundary. After skiers descend down to the highway, electric buses would pick them up and bring them back to the village base. While there would be no avalanche control, the backcountry would be "managed," and complement a small amount of lift-accessed skiing. There would be guiding services, an alpine lodge, rescue huts, safety personnel and Starlink communications. The closest analog in North America is Silverton Mountain in Colorado, but it doesn't have a village attached to it.

Zincton would be built on land Harley already owns; it would have shops, restaurants and accommodation, and all be run on clean hydroelectricity from a local run-of-river plant in the nearby ghost town of

Sandon. Harley pledges the resort would be carbon neutral from the get-go. More, he'd use funds from resort operations (collected through 1% for the Planet) to remediate the area from past mining, removing centuries-old tailing piles he says make the water toxic. He'd also institute his own privately managed wildlife reserve within the controlled recreation area during the summer months.

He argues the resort would serve to block other more extractive industries like logging and mining from doing future damage, and also positions his proposal as the antithesis to the cat- and heli-skiing he claims is "locking up" the backcountry for wealthy people. Harley promises "affordable" pricing for average skiers, staff accommodation and pro-rated purchasing options for employees to buy condos and townhouses at the resort.

"There's a tremendous amount of social good, obviously, from Zincton," he insists. The problem for many local skiers, though,

including some from the town of Kaslo, on the other side of Goat Pass, is they're already using London Ridge on their own terms. They don't need any help from Harley in that regard. There's a significant sect of existing backcountry users that doesn't want the area overrun with more skiers. They argue there are few places in the province where you can skin right from the road to the top of such epic terrain, and it shouldn't be developed.

Harley, for his part, calls these folks selfish elites, part of a tradition of resistance to any and all change in the Kootenays. He argues Zincton would in fact allow more skiers to enjoy the area, and be more inclusive. He also promises to maintain "no charge" access for people who wish to continue skinning from the road. In the end, though, that is just a promise, and something a future resort operator—whomever that might be within the scope of the 60-year lease—could reverse at any time.



The more the merrier?



Rubens digging into Goat Pass in all its uncrowded glory.



Run-of-river power.



Clean and green.



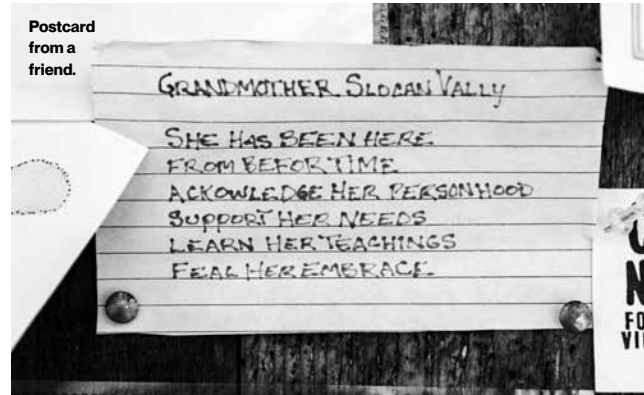
O.G. approved.



One-stop-shop.



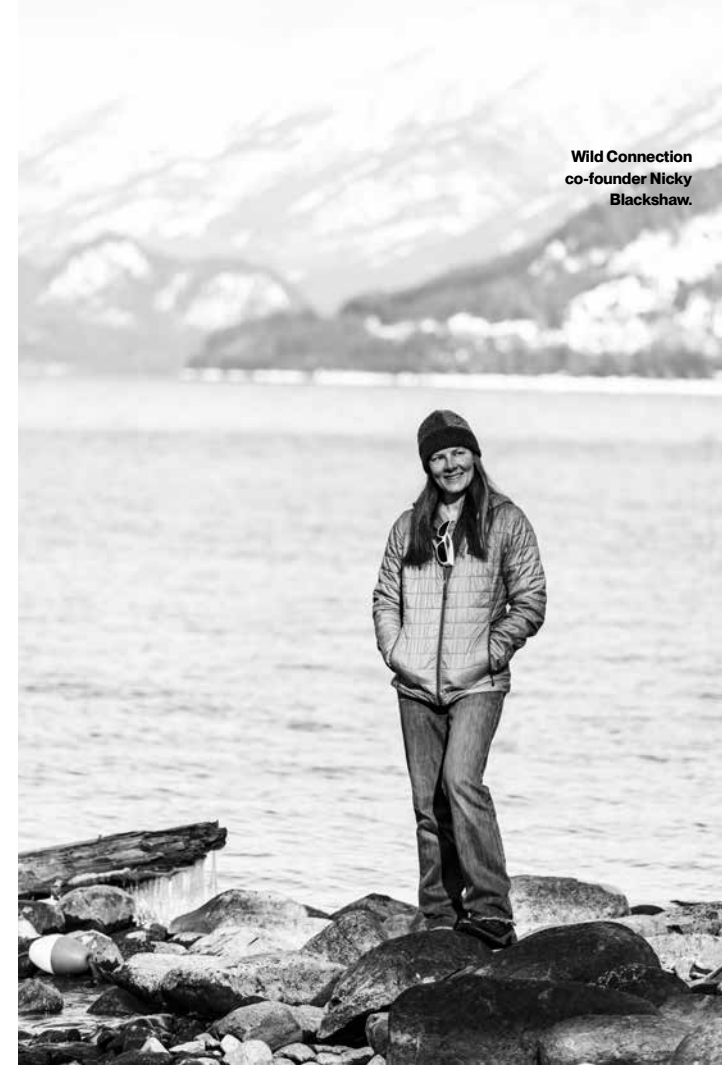
Circle of life.



Postcard from a friend.



Sarah Evans and mountains of possibility.



Wild Connection co-founder Nicky Blackshaw.

“I GUESS MY CONCERN would be that there’s a lot of local traffic there and it’s just that it’s, like, *their* ski-touring zone,” Rubens says after soaking in several days worth of beam-worthy skiing from the Goat Creek trailhead. “We have those zones around Revelstoke, and I would be really upset if someone put a resort there that I had to pay for, or wasn’t allowed to go to. But as long as people can still access it of their own free will, then I think it’s interesting. If that starts getting compromised, then I’d be less OK with it.”

That all hanging on a promise is exactly what has many locals anxious. Dennis Lynch is one of them, and doesn’t trust it. Nor is he into ski touring with 300 other people each day. He moved to New Denver as an electrician five years ago and is now gainfully employed in a calm, quaint town surrounded by open landscapes he doesn’t want overrun with people.

“I’m opposed to Zincton based on the scale of it—building a whole new village in this area,” he explains. “I don’t think that’s going to really help our existing towns, especially in an area that I cherish as a wilderness where people can recreate. And it’s a good wildlife corridor because we’re surrounded by commercial tenures. [London Ridge] is the only remaining spot that’s accessible without a mechanized machine to get to it, for the public to just be able to go skiing there.”

It’s true, Zincton isn’t the first operation to capitalize on this particular snowbelt. Retallack Lodge snowcat skiing sits directly across the road, and Stellar Heli Skiing—based out of Kaslo—also bumps up against this terrain. Mount Carlyle Backcountry Lodge is likewise just south, where skiers fly by helicopter and tour from the lodge. That’s all to say, it’s already quite crowded in this area, especially when you consider that it’s sandwiched between Goat Range and Kokanee Creek Provincial Parks.

The north-south gap between these two parks is a critical wildlife corridor for grizzlies and wolverines, amongst other species. The Valhalla Wilderness Society, along with several other organizations, and prominent grizzly bear biologist Michael Proctor, say the wildlife population would be devastated by the development.

Lynch worries about that, too, and feels there are other ways to rejuvenate New Denver. For one, the emerging tech economy and the growing ability to work remotely is already becoming a big draw for his cute little town. He also cites the construction of a local public mountain bike park as a step in the right direction. But he feels a resort is ultimately for rich visitors, and not residents. “We could fully develop tourism in a reasonable way without trying to build a town and bring 100,000 people here,” he says.

The Autonomous Sinixt and Ktunaxa First Nations are likewise opposed to Zincton, while the Okanagan Indian Band has expressed concern about it. That sentiment is shared by many members of New Denver and nearby Silverton town councils, who, along with the Regional District of Central Kootenay, have asked the province for a pause on recreational tenure applications in the area until the impacts can be better studied.

Then there’s the Wild Connection, an organization founded expressly to fight Zincton. Local Nicky Blackshaw is a member, and while her primary concern

is wildlife, she also says the claims about saving her beloved town are dubious because it doesn’t need saving. “Zincton is actually going to compete with New Denver, in terms of having its own shops and restaurants and amenities that will keep people in Zincton,” she asserts. Blackshaw argues ski areas mostly create minimum-wage, seasonal jobs, and exacerbate housing difficulties, of which New Denver already has many. It’s currently next to impossible to find a rental, since out-of-towners have bought many homes as summer cottages that sit empty when it’s not lake season. She’s worried Zincton will make that situation worse, and also questions many of the logistics in the resort’s plan. “There isn’t a parking lot here that can accommodate potentially 1,700 guests a day,” she says, before excoriating the idea that taking an electric bus for the last 20 minutes of a trip to a ski hill makes it carbon neutral. She worries Harley is mostly motivated by the prospect of increasing his land value. That said, she’s quick to note that, on a personal level, she likes Harley, just not his idea.



Chris Rubens scratches the surface.



Andreas Massati mapping contour lines.



Holy place.



Crossroads.



In with the old.

ULTIMATELY, ZINGTON.

and proposals like it, are about vision. We all want the same thing at the end of the day—opportunity, prosperity and our loved ones looked after. It's just a question of how we get there. For Harley, who's seen rough towns completely transformed by skiing, it can sometimes be a clumsy way forward, but the best one he's witnessed.

"These were dirty little towns and now they're becoming lovely places for young boys and girls to grow up and have a great life," he says. "So, we're pointed in the right direction. It's not flawless, but we

certainly don't want to go back to what we had before, which was a shithole, resource-based, mining-camp mentality."

At 68, he could just as easily retire and lean into the same backcountry skiing he's been getting nearly to himself for over 40 years. But he says there's much more at stake, and it's not in his nature to let a problem go untackled. What's more, he's got children.

"The guys that built Silverstar [Mountain Resort] in Vernon when I was a kid, they were all senior citizens, right? They were doing it for their kids and their grandkids.

When you get to this age you start to think a lot about your obligations to the next generation. Who's going to look after these kids? We've got to start now or they won't have anything. It becomes intergenerational. And what else am I going to do? You know, I have the skill to do this, and I have the resources to do this, and very few other people would make the effort to do so."

HIGH FIVES

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