

**DRAFT MINUTES**  
**ALTA PLANNING COMMISSION MEETING**  
**Thursday, June 2, 2022, 3:00 PM**  
*\*Meeting held virtually*  
Alta Community Center, 10351 E. Highway 210, Alta, Utah

**PRESENT:** John Nepstad, Chair  
Rob Voyer  
Jeff Niermeyer  
David Abraham  
Maren Askins  
Roger Bourke, Town of Alta Mayor (ex-officio)

**STAFF PRESENT:** John Guldner, Town Administrator  
Chris Cawley, Assistant Town Administrator  
Polly Mclean, Legal Counsel

**OTHERS:** Dave Richards, Alta Ski Area Avalanche Department Director  
Mike Maughan, Alta Ski Area General Manager

**1. INTRODUCTION, DETERMINATION LETTER READING, AND WELCOME FROM THE CHAIR**

Planning Commission Chair Jon Nepstad opened the meeting at 3:00 PM. Mr. Nepstad described that the meeting was not taking place at the usual time for monthly Alta Planning Commission meetings.

**2. DISCUSSION AND POSSIBLE ACTION: CONDITIONAL USE PERMIT APPLICATION FROM ALTA SKI AREA FOR THE INSTALLATION OF WYSSSEN TOWER REMOTE CONTROL AVALANCHE STRUCTURES ON MOUNT BALDY. MIKE MAUGHAN, DAVE RICHARDS**

Planning Commission Chair Jon Nepstad introduced Dave Richards, Alta Ski Area Avalanche Office Director. Mr. Richards thanked the planning commission for convening a meeting to consider issuing a conditional use permit for Alta Ski Area to install Wyssen Tower remote avalanche control systems (RACS) on private lands on Mount Baldy. Mr. Richards stated that the purpose of the project was to maintain and improve skier safety and to provide an alternative to the use of artillery to conduct avalanche mitigation at Alta Ski Area. Mr. Richards described that artillery has been relied upon for avalanche mitigation in Alta since the 1950s, but that the US Army notified Alta Ski Area that the Army would require Alta Ski Area to conclude using artillery by 2025.

Mr. Richards acknowledged that Alta Ski Area had studied various alternatives to artillery, including a small aerial tramway that would deliver avalanche workers and skiers to the top of Mount Baldy, and the installation of a 22-unit RACS array. Mr. Richards described details of the

Wyssen Tower proposal: 9 towers would be installed on private lands, and 2 would be installed on US Forest Service (USFS) lands.

Mr. Richards opined that impacts from installation of the Wyssen Towers would be limited to noise, and added that current artillery-based avalanche mitigation system was possibly louder than the Wyssen Towers would end up being. Mr. Richards responded to several components of the conditional use permit application process, including that various other agencies have provided approvals under their respective authorities. The Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) approved 9 Wyssen Towers, but may be asked to approve an additional two towers in the future.

Mr. Nepstad asked Mr. Richards to describe how many artillery targets would be covered by the proposed Wyssen Towers. Mr. Richards described that 11 Wyssen Towers could affect the avalanche starting zones associated with 20 individual artillery targets. Mr. Richards described that Wyssen Towers deliver a significantly larger explosive payload than other methods, which is part of what would allow Alta Ski Area to reduce target areas on Mt. Baldy. Mr. Nepstad asked Mr. Richards to describe how Wyssen Towers are maintained and re-charged mid-season, and Mr. Richards described that Wyssen Tower explosive magazines are picked up by helicopters and flown to the base area to be restocked with explosives.

Mr. Nepstad asked Mr. Richards whether the Wyssen Towers would disrupt views of the Mount Baldy Ridgeline. Mr. Richards said that the Wyssen Towers would not disrupt ridgeline views except from isolated locations such as from directly underneath Mount Baldy in the Ballroom area.

Planning Commission Member Jeff Niermeyer referred to the USFS approval memo for the two Wyssen Towers proposed on USFS lands, and asked Mr. Richards whether the Wyssen Towers would foreclose the potential for Alta Ski Area to install an aerial tramway to the top of Mount Baldy. Mr. Richards responded that since he did not speak for the Alta Ski Area Board of Directors, he could not definitively confirm that the Wyssen Towers would preclude a tramway to Mount Baldy. However, Mr. Richards opined that as the Alta Ski Area Avalanche Department Director, installing Wyssen Towers would render a tramway to Mount Baldy unnecessary. Alta Ski Area General Manager Mike Maughan described that Alta Ski Area would observe the efficacy of the Wyssen Towers and may conclude in the future that further mitigation methods, such as an aerial tramway, would not be necessary.

Mr. Niermeyer asked Mr. Richards to clarify how many towers the ski area planned to install in 2022. Mr. Richards confirmed that Alta Ski Area would install 5 towers east of the summit of Mount Baldy in 2022, 4 towers on the west side of Baldy in 2023, and would consider whether to install an additional 2 towers later in the future.

Mr. Niermeyer asked Mr. Richards whether Alta Ski Area had considered refinishing the towers to cause them to blend in to the landscape. Mr. Richards described that there are products available to dull the reflective nature of the galvanized steel surface of the towers.

Mr. Niermeyer asked Mr. Richards whether the ATF approval covered all the towers proposed for installation on private land, and Mr. Richards confirmed that this was the case.

Mr. Maughan asked Mr. Richards to describe the phasing of various RACS installation projects in Little Cottonwood Canyon. Mr. Richards described that with the US Army's decision to end civilian use of military artillery, numerous avalanche mitigation operations were seeking to develop alternatives to artillery prior to the US Army's deadline. Hence, Snowbird, Alta, and the Utah Department of Transportation were planning to tightly sequence respective projects during 2022, 2023, and 2024 so that each entity will be prepared when the US Army deadline to stop using artillery came to pass.

Planning Commission Member Dave Abraham asked Mr. Richards to address the map included in the meeting exhibits, and Mr. Richards described which of the Wyssen Tower installations indicated on the map it was actively pursuing, and which were tentative. Mr. Abraham asked whether Alta Ski Area would install tower extensions described in the Wyssen Tower specification sheets, and Mr. Richards stated that the ski area did not plan to install tower extensions.

Planning Commission Member Maren Askins and Mr. Richards discussed the location of the tentative Wyssen Tower installations. Ms. Askins asked Mr. Richards whether the Wyssen Towers would be less impactful on the landscape or the environment than using artillery or other alternatives. Mr. Richards opined that the Wyssen Towers would be less impactful than a tramway and observed that the explosives deployed by the Wyssen Towers would leave a "powder burn" of black or brown explosive residue on the snow surface. Mr. Neirmeyer asked whether the towers would mitigate the problem of unexploded ordinance being left on the slope, and Mr. Nepstad pointed out that artillery rounds exploded into fragments of metal that remained on the landscape. Mr. Richards stated that there would be much less unexploded ordinance associated with the Wyssen Towers,

Mr. Niermeyer asked Mr. Richards how much Wyssen Towers cost, and Mr. Richards described that towers cost \$220,000 installed, each. Mr. Richards opined that it was well worth the cost of installation given how much safer Wyssen Towers are for avalanche workers and the public than artillery.

Mayor Roger Bourke asked Mr. Richards why Alta Ski Area was breaking the installation up into two phases, and how Alta Ski Area determined where to install the towers on Mt. Baldy. Mr. Richards described that the Wyssen Tower installer was working with Alta and Snowbird, and that Alta and Snowbird were on the same timeline to respond to the US Army's order to stop using artillery. Additionally, the ski area preferred to break up the total expense associated with the Wyssen Tower project over two years. Mr. Richards described the ski area's process to determine the most effective locations to install Wyssen Towers, which involved the use of ArcGIS-based software to study the terrain on Mount Baldy, in-person evaluation of the proposed installation sites, and historical knowledge of avalanche activity on Mount Baldy.

Mr. Nepstad recommended that the planning commission approve Alta Ski Area's application for a conditional use permit to install Wyssen Towers on Mount Baldy. **Mr. Niermeyer introduced a motion to approve granting a conditional use permit for the eight Wyssen Towers on Alta Ski Lifts' private property, as requested in their letter dated May 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2022, subject to the following conditions: that all requirements in the USFS decision letter dated January 2022, and all requirements in the ATF approval letter dated March 3<sup>rd</sup>, 2021 be incorporated as**

**conditions in the conditional use permit granted by the Town of Alta, also including the foundation plans as provided by the tower manufacturer.** Mr. Nepstad asked Mr. Niermeyer to clarify how many towers he intended to refer to in his motion, and Mr. Niermeyer stated he was referring to 8 towers. Mr. Niermeyer opined that he hoped the Wyssen Towers would eliminate the need to install a tram to Mount Baldy in the future. **Mr. Abraham seconded Mr. Niemeyer's motion, and the motion was passed with unanimous consent of the planning commission.**

Mr. Nepstad suggested that the planning commission should seek an update on the effectiveness of the Wyssen Towers and possibly take an in-person tour to observe the Towers. Assistant Town Administrator Chris Cawley asked Mr. Niermeyer to forward a transcript of his motion for inclusion in the meeting minutes.

Mr. Guldner thanked the planning commission for working through the ski area's conditional use permit application, and thanked Mr. Richards and Mr. Maughan for their presentation to the commission. Mr. Guldner described that after the commission's approval of a conditional use permit, the Alta Town Council would need to grant a variance to Alta Ski Area for construction on slopes over 30% in steepness.

Mayor Bourke asked Mr. Richards when Alta Ski Area planned to begin construction, and Mr. Richards reported that the projected start date of June 20 had been postponed due to slower-than-anticipated snowmelt.

### **3. DATE OF NEXT MEETING**

Planning Commission Chair Jon Nepstad asked whether the plan to convene a social event was still in the works. Mr. Bourke opined that he'd like to hold such an event, although Mr. Nepstad reported he would be out of town on the regular date for a June planning commission meeting. Alta Ski Area General Manager Mike Maughan asked Mr. Nepstad whether the commission had questions about Alta Ski Area summer plans, and Mr. Nepstad thanked Mr. Maughan for reporting to the commission in detail at the commission's April 26 meeting. Mayor Bourke asked Mr. Maughan about the project to replace the Sunnyside Chairlift. Mr. Maughan reported that weather had delayed removal of the existing lift, and supply chain issues were creating concerns about whether Alta Ski Area would receive all the parts of the new lift in time for ski season. Mr. Maughan described that the ski area may need to run the Albion Lift at the beginning of the season if work on the new lift was ongoing at that time. Mr. Maughan described that the ski area would begin a master plan update focused on responding to climate change and managing demand for access to Alta. Mr. Maughan added the process could address UDOT's imminent decision to pursue a major transportation project through the Little Cottonwood Canyon Environmental Impact Statement.

Alta Ski Area Avalanche Department Director Dave Richards excused himself from the meeting and thanked the planning commission for taking action to grant a conditional use permit.

### **4. MOTION TO ADJOURN**

**Planning Commission Member Jeff Niermeyer moved to adjourn the meeting. Planning Commission Member Maren Askins seconded the motion, and the motion was carried with unanimous consent of the commission.**

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Minutes Approved on \_\_\_\_\_.

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Chris Cawley, Interim Town Manager