

# Ragged Mountain Resort Continues Improvements

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Eight months ago, skiers were bypassing Ragged Mountain Ski Resort, at least two of the ski lifts weren't running, and snowmaking equipment was on the fritz. The business owed more than \$100,000 in overdue taxes to the town of Danbury and \$192,000 in unpaid taxes to the IRS, which had placed a lien on the resort in December.

By the end of January, the resort owners had defaulted on a \$5 million loan and faced foreclosure or bankruptcy. They narrowly avoided both and instead sold the resort to Utah-based company RMR Pacific in May.

Ragged Mountain is now preparing for a reopening that will showcase \$2 million worth of repairs and renovations. It is only the first phase of an expansion plan that could take between five and 10 years, cost millions of dollars, and turn the once struggling ski area into a four-season, recreational resort.

"The new owners just want to really improve the quality and the experience in every regard," said Bob Fries, the new resort president.

It seems the owners found the right man in Fries, who operated Bolton Valley Resort in Vermont before he sold his interest to his partners in April. When Fries bought Bolton Valley five years ago, the resort was bankrupt.

"We took over Bolton Valley October 25 and opened November 25," Fries said. "So this is a piece of cake."

The 1,600-acre property includes the ski resort with 50 trails and nine ski lifts, a base lodge and office building, a 72-par golf course, two single-family homes, and various other buildings.

The new management had the entire summer to attend to much-needed maintenance projects, including electrical work, lift upgrades, and renovations to the base lodge, Fries said. They also met with engineers and architects to begin working on the resort master plan, which will include the construction of hundreds of condominiums and cottages.

The next phase, scheduled to begin next spring or summer, is a major redesign of the resort's golf course that could take 18 months to complete and cost \$6 million. Fries said the resort has already hired an architect and consultant – professional golfer Brad Faxon – to begin preliminary work on the course.

The resort laid 14,000 feet of air pipes for snowmaking up the side of the mountain this summer, taking out electrical lines that had been part of the previous snowmaking system but had not been maintained, Fries said. The pipes will now provide 95 percent coverage of the mountain, with the help of 25 new snow guns that extend about 20 feet above the ground to provide the maximum air time for falling water droplets

to crystallize and form snowflakes.

"It's kind of state-of-the-art technology, and it uses less energy," Fries said.

The Spear Lift and Northeast Peak Lift did not even run last year because of electrical problems, and the Village Green Lift, which did run, needed a new cable. All three lifts are ready to go this season, and a new Wonder Carpet lift – a conveyor belt system for small hills – will help beginner skiers. The resort also purchased two new grooming machines.

The resort has undergone dozens of aesthetic improvements, including new painting, a new brick walkway at the entrance, and new carpeting throughout the base lodge. A fire pit is under construction outside the lodge, and Fries said tall propane space heaters will allow skiers to sit near the pit on outdoor benches on nice days.

Fries hired Amish woodworkers from Illinois to build 54 new seasonal lockers in the lower level of the base lodge. The wooden lockers are a high-end amenity, and Fries said 41 of them have been leased so far for \$149 each.

## New Refreshment Areas

The cafeteria was gutted to allow more space for separate food stations, including grilled items, specialty items such as wraps or salads, baked goods, and candy. On the second level, a new wood-fired pizza oven and flat screen TVs are being installed in a snack bar

that also went unused last year. And at the top of Northeast Peak, a cabin previously used for Boy Scout retreats will be turned into Ragga Muffins, a small eatery that will sell soup, chili, and other hot items.

"We've got a few things to do in the next five or six weeks," Fries joked.

The snowmaking pond, which was dredged last summer, must be refilled, and the pump house is still under repair in Maine. The parking lot still needs to be paved, and the refreshment areas are still under construction.

Still, Fries said the resort is in good shape to open on time. When it does open, there will be a new building near the entrance to the resort to promote the condominiums that Ragged plans to build over the next few years.

"We're not ready to start selling any real estate, but we'll start taking names," he said. "Hopefully all the things that we've been doing are going to create a buzz in the marketplace so that when we do introduce the realty, we'll have gained some credibility."

With the first phase nearly behind them, the developers will hold a public hearing during the Danbury Planning Board meeting Thursday night to talk about development plans. Gerald Jackson, one of the owners of RMR-Pacific, told the board in May that the resort plans to pick up where the previ-

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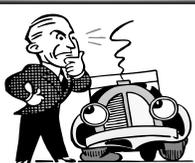
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