



[Facing Page] Neil Provo drops into the Wasatch's signature snowpack in Wolverine Cirque. Tom Korologos, a young journalist with the *Salt Lake Tribune*, reportedly became the first to deem Utah's snow the Greatest on Earth in a December 1960 edition of the newspaper's *Home Magazine*. □ **Ian Provo**

[Above] Dave Downing throws a Half Cab on the first Burton splitboard ever produced. "I wanted to prove to the world that splitboards actually work, so I filmed the whole year for Standard Films' 'TB9' on this board," Downing says. □ **Jeff Curtes**

[Below] The "red snake" lights up at the end of the day in Little Cottonwood Canyon. □ **Cameron Wingate**



Kowboy, with Shearer himself tackling the puckering first snowboard descent of Dromedary Peak's Firing Squad, likely in 2012. East Coast-raised Neil Provo hit the scene in 2008 and started using the Wasatch to train for splitboard missions to the Himalaya, Andes and Wrangell-St. Elias. In doing so, he pushed what was possible on a splitboard even further, spending massive days traversing the canyons. While Provo and Shearer would eventually team up for a Wasatch-based segment in Jeremy Jones's "Deeper," Provo notes that he spent his first winter without seeing another splitboarder.

In 2019, Mike Meru would raise the bar again, becoming the first snowboarder and seventh person to complete Andrew McLean's *Chuting Gallery* tick list. This was after a catastrophic 2013 freeriding crash that threatened Meru's ability to ever walk again. "I made it my personal mission to ride every line in the book to prove to myself that, despite the pain I had to endure to get back, I could go on living a life without limits," Meru says.

While many *Chuting Gallery* cruxes remain unthinkable for even the above-average splitboarder, the Wasatch is endlessly alluring to the uninitiated. "If I was at a ski resort waiting in line all day for four tram rides, and I look across the street and I see these epic lines coming down Superior, of course, I'm going to turn and be like, 'What is going on over here?'" says Shearer.

"For snowboard culture, the Wasatch is one of the biggest hubs in the world," says Leines. "The last 30 years of snowboarding freestyle—a lot of it has taken place here." The same elements that made the Wasatch an epicenter of backcountry freestyle snowboarding—unparalleled snow, access and an ever-expanding community of riders and garage tinkerers who value both—made these mountains the birthplace and heart of splitboarding in North America.

"We were ultimately responsible [for] getting the thing to its current state, the whole splitboard market," says Kowboy, who's now an avalanche forecaster in Utah's La Sal Mountains. "I know what role we played, and that's satisfaction enough to me."

LITTLE COTTONWOOD, BIG CONTROVERSY

Scott Yorke

IT WAS 1971 WHEN SNOWBIRD first spun the 1.6-mile Aerial Tram up to 11,000-foot Hidden Peak at the top of Utah's Little Cottonwood Canyon (LCC). Over the years, the iconic tram became almost as famous as the champagne powder it accessed. Sometime that decade, when Snowbird's lobbyists petitioned the U.S. House Interior and Insular Affairs Subcommittee to strike the areas of the Wasatch Mountains they coveted from the Endangered American Wilderness Act, Dick Bass, a Texas oil man and cofounder of Snowbird, was quoted in *Skiing* magazine saying, "Ultimately, we'll have it all.... There's 24 square miles of skiing here—not counting Alta, Brighton, or Park City—it's all right here. It's the existing areas like Snowbird that have expansion terrain and that are being operated properly that are going to be the main source of new available skiing."

The people of Salt Lake County haven't forgotten those words. The ensuing decades have seen many proposals from the range's half-dozen resorts to connect to one another via gondolas built across private and public land. Those efforts include SkiLink, a 2013 plan that sought to bridge Canyons Resort in Summit County with Salt Lake County's Solitude Resort in Big Cottonwood Canyon via gondola, and its subsequent 2014 rehashing as ONE Wasatch, which looks to connect seven Central Wasatch resorts. In the meantime, rapidly increasing visitation has created some of the worst



ski traffic in the United States, especially in LCC, where Google Maps' "red snake" can result in an hour-long drive to cover the eight miles between the mouth of the canyon and Alta. Triple that if there's an accident.

Calculating the impact of such heavy usage on the natural landscape and a watershed serving Salt Lake City's 1.2 million people is complex. After the Utah Department of Transportation (UDOT) spent the last three years reviewing 124 proposed concepts to mitigate traffic congestion, the two options identified in its Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) have yielded more questions than answers.

A \$510-million option would widen the road to four lanes to accommodate a system of 24 buses carrying 1,008 people per hour and departing every five minutes. A \$592-million option would install an eight-mile gondola from the base of the canyon in Cottonwood Heights to both Snowbird and Alta resorts, with 30 gondola cars carrying 1,050 people per hour, reaching Snowbird in 27 minutes and Alta in 37. GondolaWorks, a conglomerate of ski resort stakeholders from Snowbird, Alta, Powdr Corp and Ski Utah, touts the environmental sustainability of a "zero-emission" gondola system. But Rocky Mountain Power, which relies on fossil fuels for 71 percent of its electricity, would supply the energy for the gondola, and just as many people would still drive to the monstrous parking development proposed at the bottom of the canyon.

"That's not public transit. That's just a longer ski lift," says Kordell Black, a splitboarder and lifelong resident of Cottonwood Heights, which, as the site for the proposed parking structure under either plan, would absorb most of the impact of the 7,000 daily vehicles that currently travel through the canyon on peak winter days. Like other locals, Black is not excited to see what he calls "200-foot-tall gondola towers ruining the iconic skyline."

Of the 13,000-plus public comments submitted from June 5 to Septem-

ber 3, some were pro-gondola, some pro-bus and most pro-neither. The vast majority of locals seem to believe UDOT's taxpayer-funded plan will benefit only the ski resorts and their guests, most of whom are not area taxpayers. They point out that the plan doesn't consider impacts on the year-round and non-resort-skiing public.

"The big question is what will happen to driving access for those not using the resorts," says Alex Schmidt, campaigns coordinator for Save Our Canyons, a nonprofit dedicated to protecting the beauty and wildness of the Wasatch canyons, mountains and foothills. "If this plan is only serving wintertime transportation options to get to ski resorts in Little Cottonwood Canyon, then they've already failed to look at any other use or season, which is inherently not considering backcountry use." Not all details are known about the plan, which leaves skiers to worry that the UDOT bus proposal could eliminate roadside parking without including stops along the canyon, or that the gondola proposal could give Alta and Snowbird the ability to shut down their parking lots to backcountry users.

"Any time you change the systems, you get new behaviors in how people access and use an area," says Russ Costa, a neuroscience professor at Westminster College, professional human-factors researcher and psychologist, and 20-year Wasatch backcountry skier. "When you disrupt systems like that, you'll see unforeseen consequences that are hard to predict. Even subtle changes, like Alta's new \$25 parking charge to use the Grizzly Gulch lot, could lead to increased pressure on other trailheads and push users into more dangerous terrain."

Even if these worst-case scenarios don't play out, the general appetite of residents is to develop connectivity throughout the entire valley, whether by bus routes throughout Salt Lake City or regional light rail that gets people to the canyons more efficiently than via automobile.



[Above, Left] Howie Garber, author and photographer of the book *Utah's Wasatch Range: Four Season Refuge*, calls the Central Wasatch "a 'Gaza Strip' of powder," given the conflicts resulting from the multitude of user types who seek to access the terrain, including around Cardiac Ridge, pictured. [Right] Howie Garber [Above, Right] On a day of activism in August, Save Our Canyons floated scientific weather balloons inflated with helium to the height of several of the gondola towers proposed in Little Cottonwood Canyon. [Left] Samuel Werstak [Left] Maps market the proposals for ONE Wasatch and the Little Cottonwood Canyon gondola.

"The purpose [of UDOT's proposed expansions] is to induce further support for tourism, not for regional traffic and environmental concerns," reads Save Our Canyons' 48-page September 3 open letter in response to the Little Cottonwood Canyon EIS. "Any transportation improvements in LCC should be the product of comprehensive regional planning."

Research from Save Our Canyons showed that 81 percent of respondents wanted no new development. Other studies have shown that over 90 percent of residents, even newcomers, do not want to see the natural landscape further developed as a tourist attraction, especially not for the "huge WOW! factor that will be a boon for tourism and the Utah brand,"



as Gordon Larsen, policy director for Governor Spencer Cox, wrote in an email peddling support for the venture.

As history shows, development begets more development. Snowbird already has several thousand hotel rooms approved that it could theoretically build, as does Alta. Rapidly increasing access to LCC in as few as five or six years could be the match that lights this tinderbox, further stressing the canyon's capacity and altering its character. With that in mind, opponents think offering it as a faux-sustainability project looks like a very red herring.

"The biggest thing missing is an updated capacity study," says Ben White, a local backcountry skier. "LCC and BCC [Big Cottonwood Canyon], while beautiful and public lands, have limits the same way a bowling alley does. Not everybody gets to fit into it. Until a thorough capacity study has been done, no infrastructure should be built."

Civic engagement on this issue has been massive, with so many public comments that UDOT had to expand the comment period from 45 days to 70. Once UDOT responds to all 13,000 comments, as it is legally obligated to do, the final EIS and Record of Decision will be announced in December or January. Until then, questions remain as to whether LCC will soon become a bust for backcountry skiers and snowboarders. Will these resort-backed proposals ruin the Salt Lake touring scene? Or will folks have to take a bus to a ski resort and start skinning along the road instead of parking at the trailhead? There are more questions than answers.

Pro snowboarder Forrest Shearer has been in the Wasatch for 20 years and worked at Snowbird as a kid. As a primarily human-powered athlete, he favors keeping the road as it is and expanding—either doubling or tripling—transportation services by increasing the bus schedule and incentivizing carpooling.

"There are lots of other smaller things we can do to mitigate this issue before jumping into this big project that would only benefit resorts," he says. "As our backcountry community keeps growing, it's only going to get more crowded in the Wasatch. We need to be stewards for the environment in figuring out how we can all get along out there and mitigate avy danger while sharing these spaces and keeping them intact for future generations."

Some of the onus lies on the resorts themselves, which he thinks could do a better job aligning with the community's goals.

"If Snowbird and Alta would focus more on implementing environmentally friendly practices without trying to expand all the time," he says, "maybe we'd be more psyched to go ride there."