

# DAKOTA RIDGE MUSINGS

by Peg Neilon - Chair, Dakota Ridge Advisory Committee  
and Tetrahedron Outdoor Club member

When I moved to the coast eight years ago, it was a long slog up from the bridge at Parking Lot B to get to the skiing at Dakota Ridge. Today we have a plowed road to the top, 15 kms of beautifully groomed ski trails, marked snowshoe trails, a warming hut and some pretty amazing views of Georgia Strait, Vancouver Island, West Sechelt and the Coast Mountains. At an elevation of 1200 metres we have a similar snowfall pattern to Vancouver's North Shore ski areas. So we can forget the ferry and ski at home.

This winter recreation facility exists because of the vision and dedication of a small group of volunteers: The Dakota Ridge Winter Recreation Society (DRWRS). These hard working people spent years planning for the area: developing a business plan, designing trails, fund raising (the TOC and many other Sunshine Coast groups contributed) and partnering with the SCRDC to realize their vision of cross-country skiing and snowshoeing on the Sunshine Coast. Once the SCRDC took on the management of Dakota Ridge, DRWRS was disbanded freeing up the members to get back out on the snow.

This is Dakota's third year of full operation as an SCRDC recreation site: fees being charged, regular grooming and road snowplowing. As the snow culture on the Coast grows and more of us get out to ski and snowshoe in the area, there are many questions about how it all works, who takes care of what and what the future planning is. I am answering some of those questions here:

## **FIVE YEAR PLAN**

### **I heard something about a Five Year Plan, who's planning what?**

In 2011 the SCRDC Directors contracted a consultant to create an updated Five Year Plan for Dakota Ridge. In developing the plan the consultant reviewed the existing plan, gathered input from outdoor clubs, outdoor recreation companies, ski and snowshoe operations in other areas, Canadian ski and snowshoe associations, the Dakota Ridge Advisory Committee, SCRDC Parks staff and Sunshine Coast residents (at a public meeting).

The Draft Dakota Ridge Five Year Plan was then presented to the Directors in October 2011. The board received the plan, which remains a *draft* until the newly elected board reviews it, makes any modifications they deem necessary and then accepts it.

You will see this draft plan mentioned in the answers to other questions below.

## **PROVINCIAL PARK? REGIONAL DISTRICT PARK?**

### **What is Dakota Ridge?**

Dakota Ridge is operated by the Sunshine Coast Regional District under a Section 56 Agreement issued by the British Columbia Ministry of Tourism, Culture and the Arts, South Coast Recreation District, under Section 118 of the Forest and Range Practices act. Phew!

So we don't own the land, the Province does and it is definitely *not* a park. This type of agreement allows the SCRDC to use these forest lands for community recreation, but restricts commercial operations. That's why there won't be restaurants or hotels at Dakota Ridge any time soon.

## FEES

### **What? I have to pay?!**

We pay user fees at all of the SCRD recreation facilities: pools, rinks, gyms, halls and playing fields. Dakota Ridge is an outdoor SCRD recreation facility. Your fees offset operating costs such as: fuel for the grooming machine and SCRD snowmobile, maintenance of trails/road/facilities, fire wood for the warming hut and the cost of Parks staff time.

### **And this year I have to pay more?**

Season Pass and Day Ticket rates were raised this year. The rates are still lower than other similar cross-country ski areas. Children ski for free, while Season's Pass and Family Pass prices are *very* low.

The rising cost of fuel -- for both the groomer and the snowplow contractor -- increases operating costs. Last winter's total revenues covered about 16% of the operating cost. Those revenues were double those of the previous year, so things are trending in the right direction.

### **What's up with this new "parking" fee ?**

This new fee is \$5.00 a carload and *only* applies to visitors who are *not* Season's Pass holders or are *not* purchasing a day use ski/snowshoe ticket. This fee seems like a fair way to see that all visitors to the Ridge contribute to the costs of snowplowing, maintaining the road and parking lot and maintaining the sledding area.

### **Who is that person asking me if I paid?**

That person is a Volunteer Trail Host. Trail Hosts light and stoke the fire in the warming hut, give directions to sledders, skiers and snowshoers, keep the path from the parking lot to the trails shoveled and see that you have TP to use in the outhouse. Besides all of that, part of their job is to check that people are paying their fees. You will be able to recognize these people more easily this year as Patrick Mark, owner of Mr. Mender, has generously donated Dakota Ridge Volunteer jackets for each volunteer. Be nice to them! Their volunteer hours help keep operating costs down.

## ACCESS

### **Oh no! The road!**

Since a two-lane 2 wheel drive access road to the Ridge would have a price tag of about \$1.2 million dollars, maybe we taxpayers can live with what we have? Road improvements are budgeted for in the *Draft Dakota Ridge Five Year Plan*, but these improvements will only be made if funding grants are available to cover the cost.

This is definitely logging-road winter driving. But if you can drive in snowy conditions, travel at an appropriate speed, have good winter tires on a suitable vehicle and carry chains, access is not a problem.

The road surface gets some annual maintenance in the off season and the SCRD contracts with a local company to keep the road plowed for the winter season. Last year the contractor kept the road in great shape and created lots of extra pull-out areas to allow cars to pass more easily in the section between the bridge and the parking lot. We could use better posted information about passing and who has the right of way and this is in the works.

### **Whose road is it?**

This is a Provincial Government Forest Service Road, an FSR. All commercial users of FSRs are required to maintain the road. Logging companies need to repair their wear and tear on the road and the SCRDR must do the same.

### **Why can't I take a bus to the Ridge?**

Most buses are not designed for travel on logging roads. Shuttles to the Ridge require special vehicles and special insurance. Currently Alpha Adventures offers a shuttle service and many people choose to car-pool from Field Road. (On weekends you can actually park in the SCRDR lot for your ride-sharing). There have been many discussions about ways to make access more affordable and accessible for all Coast residents. We will continue to look for ways to improve this.

### **Why is the parking lot so small?**

The parking lot can hold about 50 cars, *if* drivers park close to the next car. It is difficult to lay out parking spaces on snow, so there is a plan to post a parking plan sign that will help us park in a way that maximizes the space available. Car pool as often as you can! The parking lot will be expanded in the 2012 off season.

## **TRAILS/FACILITIES**

### **Why don't "they" groom the trails every day?**

The Piston Bully groomer runs on fuel and requires an operator. So more grooming means more money. The current four days a week of grooming uses SCRDR Parks Staff for about 1/3 of the grooming and volunteers (see, they really are everywhere) for the other 2/3. Depending on the amount of snow that has fallen, a groomer may spend anywhere from half a day to a full day grooming the trails. So be nice to these volunteer groomers too, they are a dedicated bunch!

### **Why is there a snowmobile trail running right through the ski trails?**

The Snowseekers Snowmobile Club use a single trail, that passes up the middle of the ski trail system, to access their trails in the backcountry. These people have been using trails on Dakota Ridge for decades. They are a very cooperative minded group, regularly contributing to the cost of snowplowing the road, parking their vehicles away from the main parking lot to leave space for us and are always willing to help us out with transportation for events at the Ridge. These snowmobilers do their best to stay away from our ski and snowshoe routes. This is often not the case in other communities, where there are big conflicts between snowmobilers and skiers. So, we can be nice to our snowmobilers too!

### **Why are there only 15kms of ski trail?**

There are some areas where we can open up more trails with minimal construction costs. We have to be cautious about which areas we choose, as we do not want to negatively impact the watershed. Trail expansion is limited by the Piston Bully groomer that we have, as it cannot groom much more than the trails we already have. The *Draft Dakota Ridge Five Year Plan* includes an option for upgrading the grooming equipment and adding additional trail. The plan is to add trail that will create more big loops for a better skiing experience. Expansion depends on the SCRDR being successful in securing grant funding for the project.

### **This sledding area is boring! Where's the big sledding hill?**

## DAKOTA RIDGE MUSINGS

This past year was the first year that we actually had a small dedicated sledding area. A vast improvement over the days when kids were sledding on the road polishing it slick so that the cars could then slide off in the ditch. There is a plan to create a wider, longer and faster sledding area where sledders will not cross paths with the skiers. The funding for this is lined up and we are planning to get this work done in the 2012 off season.

### **What an ugly warming hut!**

Although not the most attractive building, our “Igloo” was a cost effective solution and does serve its purpose of providing shelter and warmth. We can envision a lovely lodge being constructed here and another warming hut in the far reaches of the expanded trail system. These are not the highest priorities on the “to do” list though, as more trails, more parking, more sledding area and a new groomer will all help bring more visitors to the Ridge and generate more income so that we can, one day, have that cosy and beautiful lodge.