



NATHAN RAFFERTY CONSIDERS TRANSPORTATION THE NUMBER ONE ISSUE FACING THE UTAH SKI INDUSTRY

The President & CEO of Ski Utah identifies problems and solutions for improving the skier experience

Park City Municipal Corporation: This is the inaugural year for the rebranded and combined Park City resort. Why is this such a big deal?

Nathan Rafferty: Ski Utah is in business to market our state's ski resorts, so it's a dream come true for us. We are always trying to promote what's new and better. The novelty of the merger will eventually wear off, but the fact that Park City is now the country's largest resort has some staying power. When you add in the major upgrades made to Snowbird and Solitude, you realize what a banner year this is for the state's ski industry.

PCMC: With the combination of Deer Valley and the mega-resort, do you now consider Park City to be the flagship ski area for the state?

NR: Well, each resort across the state is a flagship in its own way: that's what makes Utah so great. Each mountain provides a unique experience, and those on the Wasatch front and back are scarcely five miles away from each other, as the crow flies. Compare this to Colorado, which is much flatter, in terms of experience. Their mountains are also more spread out and remote. Here you can roll out of bed, drive 45 minutes or less, and make first chair.

PCMC: As a resident of Park City, do you have a favorite local's run?

NR: I have a couple: Nabob in Deer Valley and Assessment on the PCMR side of Park City. They're blue groomed runs, so folks sometimes turn up their nose when I mention them, but both just have a great flow. I like to ski them fast and early then pop over to Alta and ski their deep powder. This is what I mean about the diversity of experiences so close to each other. Of course, I also have my secret sleeper spots.

But one of my favorite ski experiences is called the Ski Utah Interconnect Tour. You need special permission because it involves skiing out of official bounds, but the tour allows you to ski Deer Valley, Brighton, and Solitude all without getting in your car. If ONE Wasatch was implemented, everyone could have this cross-resort experience, which is why I'm so excited about the possibility.

PCMC: The snow and slopes in Utah may be second-to-none, but the ski experience also involves more mundane aspects, such as traffic. This is a particularly hot topic in Park City, and the resorts are a big driver of the congestion. What do you think can be done to ameliorate the situation?

NR: The resorts are very concerned about traffic: Vail (Corporation) is investing \$50-million in improvements, which is a pretty good indicator that they plan to be here for the long haul. Resort executives tell me over and over again that they do a great job controlling the experience on the mountain, but this can all be undone by a two-hour traffic jam at the end of the day.

You can't win the race with good infrastructure and services, but you can sure lose it, so the resorts are working closely with their municipalities to develop some innovative solutions. One example is the shuttle bus pilot project that was just launched between the Park City bases. Reducing single-occupancy vehicles—especially for short distances—is key.

PCMC: An issue closely related to transportation is climate-change mitigation. The City Council recently designated energy (efficiency and reduction) as a critical priority. They have set the ambitious goals of the city government being net-zero by 2022, and the larger city being net-zero by 2032. Again, the resorts are huge part of this equation. What is their perspective on this, and what are they doing to reduce their carbon footprints?

NR: Climate change is an existential threat to our industry, so if we don't care, why should anyone else? The resorts are making some real changes—from installing mountainside solar panels to implementing composting programs to switching their bulbs to LEDs, not to mention encouraging alternative transportation.

We also have the opportunity to become industry leaders in this realm, especially given the spotlight that's been trained on us since the creation of the mega-resort. I would love Utah to be seen as the benchmark in sustainable skiing.

PCMC: One of Ski Utah's jobs is lobbying and policy advocacy.

NR: Yes, the ski and snowboard industries bring \$1.2-billion a year to the state, so people tend to listen to us.

PCMC: How do you use your clout, especially regarding climate-change mitigation, which some view as being at odds with the state's biggest industry?

NR: The most important thing is to start the conversation: how can we make things better? Like everyone else, we want to attract new businesses and residents to the state. Many people who move here are attracted by the recreation and outdoor opportunities, but they also want to live in communities that are progressive and act as stewards of the environment. Using our influence, we can gently, tactfully lean on our representatives to move the needle.

Our goal isn't to shut down coal-fired power plants, but to encourage broadening Utah's energy portfolio—especially with renewables becoming much more efficient and cost-effective. I think we've turned a corner in our thinking, which is heartening. And let's remember that most of the state's emissions are from cars and trucks, which points back to solving our transportation issues.

PCMC: Ski Utah recently developed an alliance with Protect our Winters (POW). What will this partnership bring?

NR: We wanted to align with an advocacy organization to extend our influence outside the state, and we finally found the right partner in POW. Their executive committee is composed of ex-athletes, which means they can represent our perspective well. POW also has an optimistic outlook and tone, which we considered crucial: if we are going to fight the good fight, we want people to feel like it's worth it.

PCMC: What has POW helped you do so far?

NR: We wrote a letter to Governor Herbert regarding Utah's compliance with President Obama's clean power plant rule. Governor Herbert said he would comply, making him one of the first red-state executives to do so. The fact that Utah signed on made a big splash in Washington and is an example of the innate power our state has to be a leader in the fight against climate change.

PCMC: That is quite a coup. What's the next step with POW?

NR: We will be having a series of outreach and awareness events on January 13, which we've designated "POW Day." We chose January 13 because it's the day of the year statistically most likely to have the heaviest snowfall.

PCMC: What are you planning for outreach?

NR: A variety of things. We are working closely with Mountain Accord, Utah Transit Authority, and the Governor's Office of Energy Development to promote public transit to the resorts. UTA will be offering free transit up the mountains, and some of our athletes will be riding the route to raise awareness.

PCMC: This also illustrates how transportation and climate change are so closely linked.

NR: Reducing single-occupancy vehicle trips is key to reducing carbon emissions, but it will also improve the overall experience. Everyone complains about the traffic in the Cottonwood Canyons, and not enough people realize how easy it is to take a bus from the valley to the mountains. We also want to shine a light on the source of the problem: we like to blame tourists, but locals create most of the impact. We make things worse when we don't carpool, even though we're usually traveling a pretty short distance.

PCMC: Park City has our great free bus system but what can be done for the front of the range?

NR: In the short-term, we should develop better bus service up the canyons. Looking out a little further, I would be in favor of an infrastructure solution—whether it be light-rail, a train, or a gondola. Developing a non-car alternative is frankly just much safer. Rubber wheels are more prone to human error, but the more pressing issue is avalanche danger. The access road up Little Cottonwood Canyon is the most highly rated in North America for avalanche potential. We need an avalanche-proof, weather-proof, non-car alternative.

And whatever solution we develop wouldn't be utilized only during winter. I think the bigger benefit will come during the summer: people could just throw their mountain bike on the train and bike down from Guardsman Pass.

PCMC: Other than ONE Wasatch, are there any other game-changers you would love to see?

NR: It would be great to have 500 inches of snowfall each year. A close second would be solving the transportation issue. If we don't, our future will look a lot like Colorado: folks there need to wake up at five in the morning to reach resorts that are fairly close by. We don't want this to be our experience.

PCMC: Let's hope we can all work together to develop some workable solutions to traffic and climate change, and help ensure we are all skiing well into the next century. Thank you for being such a strong advocate for the ski industry and the state as a whole.

For more information:

Ski Utah: www.skiutah.com

One Wasatch: www.onewasatch.com

Protect our Winters: www.protectourwinters.org