

Vail Resorts summer programs begin this year

Coasters, zip lines and more should be done by 2016

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VAIL — It's taken some time — about three years — but Vail Resorts this year will start work on the first phase of its Epic Discovery summer recreation program.

That program wouldn't have been possible before an act of Congress in 2011 — before that, ski resorts that lease federal land were restricted to mostly winter uses. The program for Vail was first announced in 2012, and included both educational and recreational programs.

TUBING HILL

The first phase of the program will be a summer tubing hill at Adventure Ridge on Vail Mountain, which will feature two lanes, each about 550 feet long. The hill will use tubes similar to those used in the winter, but will have hard bases. According to an email

from Vail Mountain spokeswoman Liz Biebl, work on the tubing hill will start this spring as soon as conditions permit and is expected to be finished in time for the Fourth of July.

Other construction will include work on forest-canopy zip lines, as well as a mountain coaster.

Biebl wrote that the canopy tour through Game Creek will consist of seven different zips and one aerial stairway. Zip distances will range from approximately 500 feet to more than 2,700 feet. The coaster will be built on the west side of Vail Mountain, with more than 3,300 feet of downhill run.

NEW HIKING TRAILS

The Epic Discovery plan also includes additional hiking trails on the mountain. Vail Resorts, the U.S. Forest Service, the Nature Conservancy and the Walking Mountain Science Center are also working on educational programs ranging from interpretive signs to training summer employees. Those elements should also be complete by the summer of next year.

While similar work is being

done at Breckenridge — another Vail Resorts ski area — Vail will be first to debut the summer amenities.

What the program will do, in part, is similar to what happens in the winter — people will get off the valley floor and onto the mountain.

LIKE NOTHING ON EARTH

Matt Morgan, an owner of Vail's Sweet Basil and Mountain Standard restaurants said the "opportunity is off the scale" for the summer projects.

"I think there's some demand out there — it'll be interesting to see how it all develops," Morgan added.

Antlers at Vail General Manager Rob LeVine agreed, saying he believes that accessible recreation could be a "meaningful" addition to what Vail offers.

The new recreation facilities will give Vail a chance to offer something other mountain towns can't. That prospect has Vail Valley Partnership Chris Romer particularly excited.

The Partnership runs one of the valley's main booking service, and

the group also works to attract group business. Romer said the ability to offer something different to both families and groups is especially important in the summer. Romer said resort towns — and their ski areas — each offer something a bit different to winter guests. Summer, though, is a "sea of sameness," he said. "You spend your time with your family, enjoy the scenery and the weather," and that's the main attraction.

Now, Vail competes with other mountain resorts based on the strength of its brand and reputation for customer service, Romer said.

"Epic Discovery will give an on-mountain component that no one else has right now," Romer added.

WHAT IT MEANS FOR ECONOMY

While Vail's summer programs will only be new for a short while, getting in first could be important in coming years.

Romer said that "soft adventure" is popular with guests. If those guests have a great experience, then they're likely to return.

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"It's going to be fascinating to see," Morgan said. "When you add in the education piece, I think there's some low-hanging (economic) fruit out there."

And, while Vail has seen only about 30 percent of its annual sales tax revenue come in the summer, LeVine said Epic Discovery could change that equation somewhat.

"Even moving it to 60-40 would be huge," he said.

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