

# Ski hill is battleground over development of Keweenaw

A favorite vacation spot, but residents want to keep their paradise pure

**John Flanagan**  
Associated Press

LAC LA BELLE — It's easy to see why people care so passionately about the Keweenaw Peninsula. Extending some 10 miles into Lake Superior on the northwestern tip of the Upper Peninsula, the Keweenaw is one of nature's showpieces. Rocky beaches, hills offering sweeping lake vistas, forests where deer roam up as wild berries, streams and waterfalls glaze.

Once home to mines that inspired the nickname "Copper Country," the Keweenaw's small towns and woodlands have become a haven for retirees and tourists — and a battleground over increasing development.

At the center of the debate is a planned ski hill on Mount Bohemia, near the peninsula's tip. A Detroit-area company is building what it boasts will be the Midwest's "premier ski area," featuring a 900-foot vertical drop — the steepest between the East Coast and the Rockies.

A December opening is scheduled, despite bitter opposition of some residents who say the resort would damage the environment, disrupt the natural lifestyle they treasure and trigger an avalanche of growth. Supporters say the project would boost the area economy, which has struggled since copper mining died out in the 1960s.

The deal has torn the traditionally close-knit region with accusations of selfishness, lawsuit threats and apparent vandalism at the construction site.

"It's changed people's lives. The stress level is amazing," says Lakeland resident Beth Butterby, 46. "This has always been a place of refuge. Now it's a place of conflict."

Residents of Keweenaw County, on the peninsula's northern end, will vote in November on whether to give the hill a more development-



**Paul Campbell**, who lives in Calumet and has a cabin at Lac La Belle, stands at the base of a planned ski hill on Mount Bohemia in Lac La Belle. A Detroit-area company is building what it boasts will be the Midwest's "premier ski area," featuring a 900-foot vertical drop, the steepest between the East Coast and the Rockies. A December opening is scheduled, despite bitter opposition of some residents, such as Campbell.

The beauty is incredibly fragile, and once it's broken you can't put it back together again," Robert Fitch, a former miner and logger, built a summer camp in Lac La Belle 20 years ago and now lives there all year. From the back yard, he gazes across the lake at Mount Bohemia, where ski runs carved into the tree-covered hillside are clearly visible.

"They won't stop with just a ski hill," Fitch says. "That's just to get their foot in the door. They'll have condos and golf courses — just tear it up so we won't even be able to stay here."

But in the nearby village of Copper Harbor, convenience store operator Carol Melahn dismisses the opposition as "last-man-in syndrome."

"They have their piece of paradise and don't want it to change," she says. "Change is inevitable; the question is what kind. A ski hill is a good, clean development, no mosquitoes. Would you rather have a sawmill? A nuclear plant?"

Restaurant owner Don Knapik says logging and tourism are about the only ways to earn a living with the mines gone, and tourism is seasonal. Keweenaw County, whose population of 1,900 is smaller in Michigan, had police rates of 1.1 percent in July, but 1.2 percent in January.

"Only 20 percent of Copper Harbor is open in winter," Knapik says. "We're off the beaten path, and building any kind of industry here is just plain hard. We need to be able to offer year-round paychecks, raise the tax base, become a more complete community."

The ski resort developer is Crosswinds Communities Inc. of Novi, which is leasing the Mount Bohemia property from Lake Superior Land Co., owner of some 9,000 acres in Keweenaw County.

Lake Superior Land was established to manage the mining company's vast acreage after the mines closed. It's now a subsidiary of International Paper Co.

Bob Grossnickel, retired president of Lake Superior Land, says the company always envisioned "cottage" development in the Keweenaw, including a ski hill on Mount Bohemia.

He says "environmental extremists" repeatedly have shut down development proposals, hoping the company would sell its property to preservationists.

"They fought the mines, they fought the pulp mills," he says. "They always said they wanted 'sustainable development' like ski hills, but now they're fighting that too."

Some ski hill foes have urged International Paper to sell land to the Nature Conservancy, which has opened a Keweenaw office. But they deny opposing all development.

"It can be done, but slowly and carefully," says Paul Freshwater of Eagle Harbor. "People don't come here primarily to buy a T-shirt or eat a good meal. They come for the view, and if you mess that up they won't come back."

Crosswinds insists it has no intention of turning the Keweenaw into a pricey, crowded tourist mecca. The ski hill will blend easily with its surroundings, company spokesman Louise Glibberman says.

"There won't be a shopping center, lodge shop or movie theater," he says. "If we're going to build the best wilderness ski area in the Midwest, we've got to keep the wilderness."

The five-year plan calls for building several dozen ski runs, up to four lifts, a lodge and 50 cabins, Glibberman says. In summer, the resort would offer activities such as kayaking and mountain biking.

**Lonie Glibberman**, spokesman for ski resort developer Crosswinds Communities, stands before two of several runs planned at the controversial Mount Bohemia ski hill. Cutting and seeding of two dozen regular and wooded backcountry runs at the hill are nearly complete for a planned December 2000 opening. Whether the hill will be allowed, however, remains in doubt.



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