

Stan Sorensen

Hey everyone. Thanks for tuning into Altabanking. Altabank is a community bank and our community is Utah. And what Altabanking lets us do is get together with thought leaders and business leaders and others within the state and talk about issues that are important to those of us who live and work here in Utah. One of the most visible and most important industries that we have in the state is recreation, outdoor recreation in particular. And I am really happy today to be joined by Dave Fields, who is the President and CEO of Snowbird. Dave, thanks for coming in today.

Dave Fields

Thanks for having me.

Stan Sorensen

Yep. We're going to have some fun today talking about all kinds of different stuff. So I will put a bit of a disclaimer in here that a lot of the topics that we're going to talk about today are near and dear to my heart as a skier, an outdoor recreation enthusiast. I've gotten to know Dave a little bit over the course of the past couple years, but really this year we've been able to spend a little bit of time together in a few different fronts. And so we're going to be able to dive in deeply in some topics. So it's going to be a lot of fun. Before we do that though Dave, tell us about you.

Dave Fields

Sure. Well, first of all, thanks for having me today. This is exciting to be here with you and talk about my favorite industry. It's what I do for fun and it's what I do for work. And I grew up in Utah. I'm a lifelong Utah resident. I grew up skiing at Alta where my dad was a ski instructor for 30 years. And so I was one of, what they called, the Altagroms, the little kids jumping off cliffs and having fun up there. And then in 2000 I was able to join Snowbird and have spent 22 years working at Snowbird and had seven or eight different jobs starting as the Assistant Director of Public Relations and went on to have various titles in the organization. And that is really one of the amazing things about Snowbird is, we're big enough that you can grow with the company as your skills lead you and your interest. We can give people opportunities to grow inside the company and have more responsibility and learn new aspects of the business.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah, yeah. Is it unusual to be a kind of a lifer at a single resort or even in the resort business?

Dave Fields

It's really not. What happens is, people say I came here for a winter and never left. And I was at a retirement party yesterday for a gentleman, one of our electricians, and he had spent 40 years working at Snowbird. And when I took over for Bob Bonar, three people retired at the same time, Bob Bonar, Tom Jones, and Jerry Giles. And I think between the three of them, they had something like 143 years of tenure at Snowbird. So when you get there and it fits, it really fits. And it's a special place with special people. And driving up that canyon in that scenery and snowbird attracts a really amazing clientele as well. These are people who are passionate about skiing and they come here and it's the highlight of their day, their week, their year to be at Snowbird in the mountains in Little Cottonwood Canyon. So when you look at other opportunities, you kind of weigh that out and you think, well, I really like being here.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Having spent time up there of course there are probably a lot worse choices and options-

Dave Fields

Yes. I think so.

Stan Sorensen

Out there for sure. No, that's great. This was a decent season. Little weird weather-wise of course. Latest ski Utah numbers that I saw, and they're a little bit dated maybe a month or so, was about 5.3 million skier days across the state this year. How would you sum up your season?

Dave Fields

Well, locally and nationally there was tremendous demand for skiing and truly all outdoor recreation, whatever it is. People want to be outside recreating. And we saw that as well. Historically, with good snow years, we have more visitation. With poor snow years, it really drops. And you can chart it over 50 years of our history and it tracks very closely. And that really split apart this year with much more interest in skiing, regardless of what the conditions were. We did not have the best snow year ever. It was very wet in October. It didn't snow at all in November. It snowed like crazy in December. And then we had to ride that snow from December all the way through January and February, where it snowed very little. But the conditions stayed good. Our grooming team did an amazing job. Our snow makers did an amazing job and they kept the product good.

Dave Fields

So the demand was very high, and we ended up having a very good season and our staff really worked hard. We, like all companies, have amazing staffing challenges right now. So the people who we have on staff worked harder than ever, and they got us through. And we had a lot of out-of-state guests staying in the hotels. We had the locals skiing a lot. And we had the drive market coming in as well. So, as a state, as a resort and as a country, we saw increased visitation and a lot of people thankful to have outdoor recreation once again.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. I do want to talk about the labor stuff. And so you kind of opened the door on that. Let's walk through that and then we'll sort of move into some other topics too. At one point I remember, and I can't remember which of the mornings it was, I was up and we were all talking and you had mentioned that, at that point it might have been February you were down, I want to say 150 or 200 employees.

Dave Fields

That's correct.

Stan Sorensen

With a resort where everybody's job is critical, and you can't always... people aren't necessarily portable. You can't necessarily take somebody who is an electrician and move them over and have them run a CAT.

Dave Fields

Right.

Stan Sorensen

How do you manage to that?

Dave Fields

Well, it's very tricky. The last couple years have presented a lot of challenges in the hospitality industry. The first year we shut down in March due to COVID. The second year we operated with very adjusted operating plans, and we changed everything about the ski experience. This past winter was more of a "normal" operating environment, but we had to do it with sometimes over 200 fewer employees than we normally carry, which is about 1,900 employees in the winter. So what we did is we prioritized the operations that we had to have open. We had good staffing in ski patrol. Our lift department was fairly well staffed. Other areas were a real challenge. Like ski instructors or food and beverage or parking. And I can go on and on.

Dave Fields

And so you adapt. In some cases, we all pitched in and we went out and we helped and we washed dishes and bused tables and park cars. We do a lot of that. We ask people to go out of their normal operation and to help out during these peak times. In other scenarios, you had to close operations. We had several retail outlets that were closed because we didn't have the staff. In a ski school environment you have to tell people, "We're full. We can't take your business today," which is very painful. When somebody comes in from out of town and they want a lesson, or if parents want to get their kids in a multi-week program, those filled up quickly because we didn't have enough instructors. So we're working very hard to recruit talent back to the ski industry, back to hospitality. We have not found the silver bullet yet but there isn't a silver bullet. It's a combination of many things that you have to do to get people to come work for you right now. Pay is obviously one of them.

Stan Sorensen

Sure.

Dave Fields

Pay is escalating very quickly and we acknowledge that, and we're adjusting. But you also have to explain to people what else is involved in working at a place like Snowbird or any of the mountain resorts. You have to describe to them what the ski benefits are, that your family gets ski benefits, that you get food discounts, that you get free lessons and rentals and all these things. But also people want to know about benefits. What's the healthcare like. That is a very big driver for us. We see a lot of people staying with us because we have good healthcare. But there's also a mental health crisis going on right now. We started a program this year, working with a local company called Phoenix Rebellion, and they work with first responders on mental health. And we plugged our ski patrol into that program, because we really saw a need amongst this population of employees who are dealing with traumatic events with very serious injuries on the mountain. And that. Over and over again, and the nature of the work that they do on the mountain with explosives and avalanches, things like that. We really saw a need for that.

Dave Fields

So we teamed up with that organization, Phoenix Rebellion. And they're providing counseling for our ski patrollers. But we also looked at our employee assistance program and said, "Okay, this isn't meeting our needs." Because there's so much demand amongst our employees and their families about mental

health and needing counseling and getting support, whether it's for your children or your marriage, or you personally. And those are the kinds of things that round out a work experience. And people expect more now out of their work experience. And when you can present all of that and being able to work in the mountain environment, that's a good package. But it continues to be a struggle.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Well, and I hear horror stories from... I mean, we'll pick on one from my state of Washington. Steven's Pass up there. They had great snow, but they were so understaffed that they couldn't get all their parking lots open and they couldn't run all of their lifts consistently. Gave them a real black eye. It doesn't sound like, well, I mean, my own experience of course, up at Snowbird is you didn't have it anywhere near that badly, but it sounds like as well, some of what you're offering, some of what you're talking about here is unique in the employee experience as well, compared to some of these other resorts. Is that an accurate statement on my part?

Dave Fields

Well, I'm very biased. I think it's unique and I love it and it's my home and where I enjoy being every day. But there's no question that the demand for recreation right now is at an all time high. Whether you're a mountain biker or a motorcyclist, I'm just listing all the things I like to do. A road biker, a hiker, a rock climber, a skier, a back country skier, wherever you are at a recreation space, there's more demand. There are more people participating in recreation. And so a lot of us are dealing with all time high demand with all time, low staffing. And so that's a nexus that you have to work very hard to make sure that you can operate your lifts or your parking lot shuttles or your restaurants. And it's not easy right now, given the staffing situation and how quickly people leave a job for another job for a short term gain, an increase in wage. And you see a lot of movement of people moving around to different opportunities. Sometimes in the industry and sometimes not.

Dave Fields

But as a whole, I think the ski industry having had a record in the country, 61 million visits, that's the most ski days ever recorded in the US in a winter. I think the ski industry is responding well, but we have growing pains. And we're all trying to figure out the right number of visitors to have on our mountain at any one time, the right way to get them to and from the mountain, the right way to feed them and give them all of the experiences they look for. But we are hoping to see a rebound in employment numbers this year, but Utah continues to have the lowest unemployment in the country. It's a very competitive place to find good employees.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. I would assume that some of your highly specialized employees, ski patrol always comes to mind for me. Are you seeing actually a shortage in terms of the number of qualified patrollers out there as well? And I mean, obviously that would have an impact, but...

Dave Fields

We have what I think is the best ski patrol in the world. They are amazing people. And a lot of what attracts people to Snowbird is our terrain, which is really fun to ski and to snowboard on, but it's also fun to work. It's exciting. We have a lot of avalanche control routes. We use avalanchers, hand charges, howitzers, Wyssen towers. We have every tool in the menu for avalanche control. And I think our patrol is viewed as one of the best, a leader in the industry on many fronts. And so we have a lot of people who

want to come patrol for us. And that is a nice place to be in, but there's a lot of training and a lot of work that goes into working at Snowbird in patrol.

Dave Fields

So I think on that front, we do pretty well, but we constantly work with that team to also address their concerns too. Just because it's fun skiing, doesn't mean it's a perfect job. We continue to meet with all the departments and find out what their needs are at the time. For example, I met with them this year and a big concern is how do we bridge health insurance over the summer? So we can have continuous health insurance or other issues that might be coming up. And we try to address that and find solutions because it's in those key roles, whether it's a CAT driver, a tram and lift electrician, ski patroller, those folks, we are heavily invested in them and they to us. And we want that to continue for many years because they're so good at their job. And they have skills that I can't get off the street. And when someone knows how to groom regulator Johnson or Powder Paradise, that's a skill. Not everyone can do that. I cannot jump in a snowcat and groom Regulator. I can bus a table. I can wash dishes. I can park a car, but if I groom regulator, you don't want to ski it.

Stan Sorensen

Okay. Point taken on that one. I'll make a note on that one. Yeah, that is very interesting. And I love that you're thinking about a lot of these questions that these employees have. The bridging of the health insurance by way of example, that's a really good one. I can see that one as making a real difference for them as well.

Dave Fields

Right. And we're still working. I haven't solved it yet.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. Awesome. You talked about accessibility and there are a couple different directions that I want to take that conversation. One is just having a conversation about the accessibility of skiing in general. This is a topic that I've read a little bit on. I know Ski Utah's got their Discover Winter Program. They're trying to open up accessibility to really all kinds of different people out there that want to have an on snow experience. It feels to me like that could be a bit of a double edged sword. I mean, I think it's more good than bad, certainly, but it does bring more people to the mountain, and that does put a heavier tax on the employees, puts a little bit heavier tax on accessibility of being able to get to the mountain, which will come to things like that. How has it been impacting you and what are you seeing there?

Dave Fields

I was intimately involved in the Discover Winter Program that we launched this year with Ski Utah. And that was really a bootstrap program that we put together through the hard work of Raelene Davis with Ski Utah. She really led the charge and-

Stan Sorensen

Yeah, she's great.

Dave Fields

Joe Gorugio. And we found a way to reach folks who would not otherwise have an opportunity to get on the mountain. And we gave them the outerwear. Hats, gloves, goggles. We gave them skis to use for the winter. Boots, poles, instruction, lift tickets. And we wanted to do better as an industry around diversity. We are not happy with the lack of diversity. And when I went out and spent time with these people who had lived in Utah for years and years. Some of them had never been up the canyons. Most of them had no idea how to even approach getting ready to come skiing, what to wear, how to drive, what to drive, when to come. And we think as an industry, it's critical that our sport be available for all walks of life, everybody in the community, not just the same people that you see on a chairlift every day.

Dave Fields

And at the end of that program, we had a very nice reception down at Alpha Coffee at the mouth of Big Cottonwood Canyon. And I went and I met with all the participants and I heard their stories about what it was like to learn to ski and how excited they were and how enthusiastic they were about this sport and it's in their backyard, but they weren't raised in a family that skied. Their parents didn't ski like my parents skied. Their siblings didn't ski. And once we gave them an avenue to experience it and take some of the fear away from it, because it is scary. I talked to one lady and she said, "They told me to layer my clothing." She said, "I didn't know what that meant. What does layering mean?" And then she told me she showed up with ankle high socks and they pinched in her ski boots. She had no idea. She'd never heard the term Long Johns, what is Long John?

Dave Fields

And the enthusiasm that I saw amongst those people who now consider themselves skiers was so fulfilling. And I think it's incumbent on all of us as businesses in this community to make sure that people have an opportunity to get exposed to skiing and this amazing mountain winter environment that we have here in Utah.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. And I should be clear. I'm all for opening up accessibility, getting more people outdoors. I mean, we were talking before we got started on this podcast about the work that you do with Wasatch Adaptive Sports at Snowbird, as a board member, our involvement with the bank and just the benefits of getting people outside and being able to extend that to these other groups is, I think, vitally important.

Dave Fields

There's a lot of education that is required with these new populations experiencing the mountains. I'm on the board of Cottonwood Canyon's Foundation. And we had a meeting yesterday up at Solitude, and we were talking about the new demographic of the canyon visitor, especially in the summertime. People who were not raised hiking with their family and people need to be welcomed into the mountains. And it needs to be an environment where it's encouraging people to recreate responsibly. And that means take your trash out and stay on the trail and don't cut new trails. But the real challenge is how do you teach people? How do you reach people who aren't engaged, let's say on the social media for all these outdoor recreation opportunities that we have, or following media that we're using to talk about this?

Dave Fields

So I think Utah, as a whole, has a huge opportunity here to welcome all these new residents. We have a population that's going to double along the Wasatch Front in the next 20 or 30 years. People are coming

here because of the recreation and the jobs. They want to live this lifestyle that we all have lived. I've lived my whole life here in Utah. It's why I still live in Utah, is the outdoor recreation, but we need to share this knowledge we have about how to reduce the impact on the natural resource, whether it's trails or water or air and teach all these folks in a welcoming way, hey, this is how you should prepare to come for a day in the mountains, no matter what the season is.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. And I can imagine as well that there's some part of that discussion that breaks down the intimidation factor as well. If you read Outside Magazine or you go to social media and everything's about climbing big rocks, taking multi-date backpacking trips. And if you want to go learn to rock climb, you don't have to start by... it's not a free solo type experience where you're free climbing Half Dome or El Cap. You don't have to backpack overnight. You don't even have to do elevation gain. There are plenty of hikes that are relatively flat. So I imagine that's a big part of it too.

Dave Fields

It is. One of the board members on the Cottonwood Canyons Foundation is in leadership at REI. And he was talking about the responsibility that they have is they sell equipment to people who are first timers going out in the mountains. And we need to do a better job at every touchpoint. Whether it's at REI or at Trailhead or at a transportation hub. Hey, pack out what you pack in. Here's where the restrooms are. Use the restrooms. Utah's, especially Salt Lake is unique with the watershed. There's not a lot of people that realize that, hey, that water that is in the form of snow or the creek, you might be thinking about waiting in, that's your drinking water. And we need to keep it pure and make sure that that water quality stays high because we have some of the best water in the world. But as the recreation intensity grows and the amount of people coming up in the mountains on a year round basis, we have to be good stewards and make sure those people are coming, understand what the implications are of littering or not using a restroom. Those are really heavy lifts, but it's important.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. So one of my, well, in fact, my big summer activity is fly fishing. And I remember these conversations going on maybe, well, it kind of started with the movie River Runs Through It. That's what most of the guides I know will tell you. Ruin fishing for everybody. It didn't obviously, but having kind of a similar conversation. You want more people to be experiencing the river. But how do you educate them? How do you teach them what good manners are in the river? How do you teach them not to step in a, where the fish spawning, things like that. I don't know that they crack the code either, but it is interesting to kind of now we're seeing this in a completely different recreation area.

Dave Fields

That's right. Yeah. A lot of interest in outdoor recreation since the pandemic started. Whether it's golf or skiing or biking, whatever it is you do, it's busier than it used to be. And that's a growing pain for the industry and all the residents. And I spend a lot of time in Southern Utah and whether it's going to Tory or going to Moab, there are just more people. And so it is part art and part science, trying to figure out what that right number of visitors is on any given day, you're starting to see reservations at various recreation-

Stan Sorensen

I was going to ask you about that. Yeah.

Dave Fields

Outlets. That's one option, but you still have to make sure that the people who are coming are leaving no trace on the resource, and they're not damaging the resource anymore than is necessary to walk up a trail or ride your bike up a trail. And as I see communities embracing recreation, as other industries are fading out, especially in Central Utah, Southern Utah. I just went to Richfield and rode their new mountain bike trails down there. They're amazing. And I think somebody told me they had plans to put in 85 miles of trails. So communities are responding to this uptick in recreation demand.

Dave Fields

And I think the ones that are doing it right, for example, a couple years ago, I went to Vernal on a weekend camping trip with my family because we heard they had great mountain bike trails and they do. And they're amazing, McCoy flats and red sand, and all those trails are super fun. I would never go to Vernal or Richfield unless they had some kind of recreation. So I think it's about spreading people out around the state rather than having them so concentrated just in the five national parks. And I think the Utah Office of Tourism has done a very nice job about promoting the other assets that Utah offers and moving people around, educating them, and also maintaining the resource of Utah to the outdoor folks who are in charge of restrooms or any kind of trail maintenance. It's a never ending battle to try to keep restrooms clean. And private companies like Snowbird are trying to do our part. We fund the cleaning of the White Pine Trailhead restrooms because frankly, Salt Lake City Public Utilities, and the Forest Service cannot keep up. They do not have the budget and the bandwidth to deal with restrooms. So companies need to step up and users need to step up and support organizations that are addressing these needs that are coming with increased visitation.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. In podcast past with other guests, we've talked about public private partnership, which say that three times fast, this feels like an ideal spot to invest in that public private partnership, get more companies involved to augment what the public entities can't do because you're right. I mean, Forest Service, I grew up around Forest Service folks and even with seasonal work in the summer, they were never able to stay on top of things like trail maintenance or facilities maintenance.

Dave Fields

And what you're seeing in organizations or agencies like the Forest Service that are dealing with the effects of climate change and the number of forest fires that are happening, most of their budget is now going to fighting forest fires. My predecessor partnered with a group called the National Forest Foundation and Snowbird was the first resort to take part in the Ski Conservation Fund. And we give a dollar for every room night at one of Snowbird's four hotels to the National Forest Foundation. Then a federal grant matches that money and it comes back into the local forest via organizations like the Cottonwood Canyons Foundation. So then visitors are actually funding bathrooms. They're funding trail maintenance, they're funding noxious weed eradication. And it's a way that we can have the public private partnerships that you mentioned help these agencies that are really strapped for funds right now.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah, that's great. I was not aware of that particular organization. I have to go look them up and...

Dave Fields

National Forest Foundation. They're amazing. They're doing really good work and they have this relationship with federal dollars where they can bring money to bear. So you're doubling your money. It comes back and it goes to on the ground projects in your forest. And it's really been amazing. We're close to a million dollars raised for the Uinta-Wasatch-Cache National Forest Projects through the Ski Conservation Fund in the last-

Stan Sorensen

That's impressive.

Dave Fields

Decade or so.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. That's really impressive. Love to hear that. Let's shift topic on accessibility for a second and you know where we're going because we talked about it for a couple minutes before we got started, but as we, and again, I love making the outdoors more accessible to people, but there is a bit of a tax, obviously, especially when you talk about Little Cottonwood and Big Cottonwood and that's the increased pressure of people wanting to drive up the canyon, regardless of season. And I see it when I go up in the summer. I see it I go up in the winter, just like almost everybody else listening to this podcast does. There's some interesting proposals on the table right now for Little Cottonwood with accessibility. I know you're heavily involved. Would love to get your take on that.

Dave Fields

Sure. A little background, UDOT has been studying and trying to solve the riddle of Little Cottonwood Canyon for as long as I've been alive. And there have been studies after studies about this unique situation where you have a steep eight mile canyon that is essentially a two-lane highway that has 64 avalanche paths and the harder it snows, the more people want to be there. And what UDOT has identified is trying to solve this problem, not for just today's visitation volume, but tomorrow's and all the way through 2050. So they've been analyzing every transportation option known to man and some that are still in the experimental phase. And they narrowed it down last June to two options, which is road widening, turning Little Cottonwood Canyon into a four lane highway with snow sheds and having two dedicated bus lanes, one up and one down and having tolling as part of that strategy as well. And the other is an aerial gondola going from just outside the mouth of the canyon all the way to Snowbird and Alta.

Dave Fields

And in our assessment, and I spend a lot of my life working on this and studying the options. What we think is as UDOT considers three main factors: safety, mobility, and reliability. It's pretty clear to us that putting a four-lane highway in Little Cottonwood Canyon and creating these massive cement pathways up the canyon and bridging the canyon with snow sheds will only create more vehicles in the canyon. And when it snows, the canyon's reliability goes way down because it gets slippery. Buses crash, cars crash, and it's a mess. And we need a solution that works in all weather conditions. That has a very high safety factor, which a gondola is one of the safest ways you can get around the mountains, Europeans do this or installations going in all over the world because it's clean. It has very minimal effects on air quality. It's reliable. The gondola system that we use lasted 50 years. And so you have a lot of time to

offset the cost of the installation. And we really feel like gondola is the more progressive way to safely get people up and down the canyon.

Dave Fields

And they cannot only get to the ski resorts, but most of the back country uses that happen in Little Cottonwood Canyon happen at White Pine, or Grizzly Gulch or Albion Basin. And with stops at Snowbird and Alta, those areas are very accessible as well for back country users, either in the winter or the summer. And so we've thrown our support behind gondola. We feel like it's very important that people understand the implications of doubling down on diesel buses because not only does it have a negative impact on the water and the air, our survey shows that people also don't want to ride the bus. So don't spend a lot of money on a transportation solution that's supposed to last through 2050 that no one wants to use. That's really a bad decision in our opinion. We think a gondola would be a stunning ride up and down the canyon.

Dave Fields

It does have impacts. I'm not sugarcoating the impacts. There are towers in the canyon and that's a change and people have a hard time getting their heads around that. But I feel like when people road the gondola and realize that no matter what's happening with avalanches or wind or weather, you can reliably get up and down the canyon in a warm cabin that has Wi-Fi and a beautiful view, I think people will really enjoy that experience. And it will work today and it'll work in 2050 when our population along the Wasatch front is twice what it is today.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. Well, so in my reading on this topic, first of all, I agree. I don't see people wanting to ride the bus. Especially, if it's like a city. I mean, I see what goes on with the ski bus and it's not full in either one of the canyons, but when I read about some of the design plans for the gondola and kind of making it this kind of cool first class type experience. When you say you got Wi-Fi, you've got outlets for charging. It's going to be heated and comfortable and kind of seems like it's going to attract a lot of folks who might otherwise say I'm just going to get in the car and tough it out in the traffic.

Dave Fields

Well, what's perfectly clear to me as I drive off down I-15 where we have six or seven lanes on each side of the freeway is if you build more lanes, they will fill up.

Stan Sorensen

Oh yeah.

Dave Fields

And will still have congestion. The difference is in Little Cottonwood Canyon, it snows a lot. It can snow two to three inches an hour. And then the road turns into an ice rink. And nothing with rubber tires, I don't care what anybody tells you, is going to have good traction. And the canyon only works as well as the worst car in it. The slowest driver, the worst snow tires. And until we get a system where people can get up and down the canyon without traction related problems, we're going to have congestion and single occupant vehicles are not the future. We need to get away from the idea that if I want to go recreate, I need to throw my toys in my vehicle and drive to the front door of where I'm going. We need to think bigger and think cleaner, safer. We have 64 avalanche paths in Little Cottonwood Canyon.

Stan Sorensen

I was going to come back around to that. Yeah.

Dave Fields

And as we've seen the last few years, when they start running, it presents a real hazard to people. Two years ago, we had the three day inter lodge at Snowbird.

Stan Sorensen

I remember.

Dave Fields

And that means people were stuck in their hotel for three days. And the first day is kind of fun and novel. The second, day it's getting old. The third day, you have a real problem. Because that happened on the heels of President's Day weekend. So we hadn't had a food delivery at Snowbird with over 2000 people on property for six days. And you get to a point where you're running low on food. We're making food deliveries to the people staying on the Bypass Road between Alta and Snowbird. When you have emergencies, sometimes the road doesn't cooperate.

Dave Fields

We had an employee who thought he was having a heart attack and I called UDOT and said, "We've got to get this person out of here." And they said, "We can't go anywhere. You can't use a helicopter. You can't use a snowcap" because these avalanches in these extreme weather events we're starting to see right now are very big. And you do not want to be caught in it. Even if you think you're having a heart attack. So what we like is a gondola that could provide year round access to recreation with very minimal impact on the environment. The tower footprint for these towers is very small compared to the, you can imagine the earthwork it would take to put a four lane highway and snow sheds in Little Cottonwood Canyon. That would be a very big scar in that canyon.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. The avalanche piece, anybody who is listening or watching that doesn't take seriously the fact that really Little Cottonwood Canyon is about the most active avalanche highway in the country, if not the most. Right? With-

Dave Fields

The avalanche hazard index in Little Cottonwood Canyon is the highest for any road in North America. When you look at the scale of low to high avalanche hazard, Little Cottonwood Canyon is kind of off the index. And when I talk to the people who've spent 40 or 50 years in Little Cottonwood Canyon working with avalanches, Liam Fitzgerald, Peter Shorey, others, they tell me the way to bring down the avalanche hazard index, which means the hazard of being in the canyon is to have fewer people under the avalanche paths. You do not want to be sitting in a bus under an avalanche path.

Stan Sorensen

No. And that's, I was going to mention. If you need any other convincing, drive up right now and look at some of the scars that are still there from those avalanches two years ago. Right?

Dave Fields

That's exactly right.

Stan Sorensen

When you had the three day inter lodge, I mean, when you see it without snow on it, it's really illuminating.

Dave Fields

Yeah. We are so convinced that gondola is the solution. We have a lot of acreage outside of the ski resort and our private lands include Mount Superior. And we have said that if gondola is chosen, we will put all of our private lands outside of the ski area boundary in a conservation easement. So that means Mount Superior would be conserved for all future development. We think that's very important. And there's other lands in Big Cottonwood Canyon and also in the White Pine and Red Pine area. So we're all in on this. And we intend to pay for our season pass holders and our employees to ride the gondola as we do now and all Cottonwood Canyon Resorts do. They pay for their employees and pass holders to ride the ski bus. We would carry that forward with gondola. So we would have a lot of skin in the game as well and help with the cost. But you also, with gondola, it's something people want to ride. So you have people paying to use your transportation and offset the capital cost of acquisition or your operating costs for your transportation solution. That also helps bring down your cost.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. And again, that's an important message about bringing down the cost. I think the skin in the game, and I know all four resorts, well, the two resorts, try that, because we're really talking about Little Cottonwood. I know both of you will have plenty of skin in the game and that's an important message for the naysayers who are out there saying, "Well, why do we want to publicly fund something that benefits two private enterprises?" It doesn't work that way.

Dave Fields

Well, State Road 210 is a state highway and that's why the state has undertaken this study that's gone on for years. And as they work through the process, and they need to find a transportation solution to get thousands of people up and down the canyon. They are coming to ski. They are coming to recreate at our two resorts, but they're also going to the back country. And so the state realizes that they need to address this situation because it's not working today. Imagine what it'll be like in 2050 if we don't do anything.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. It's going to be... I don't even... yeah. Bad. You touched on twice as we were talking about the gondola. Sustainability, conservation. One of the things that I'm really impressed with is the work that you all have been doing over the past few years with everything from how do you reduce waste to water conservation, environmental conservation, things like that. So I wonder if you could tell us a little bit more about that.

Dave Fields

Sure. I'm very lucky to work for the Coming family and the Bass family who support the idea of reinvesting and doing our part to reduce our impact on the climate. The Coming family has a resort

company called Powder and the mantra is play forever. And it's about sustainability. It's about making sure that the recreation we enjoy will be available for our kids and our grandkids. And some examples of that are the ownership just funded a new cogeneration plant at Snowbird called Snowbird Power Systems. And we're bringing that online right now. And it is three large caterpillar engines that burn natural gas and will power the entire resort. The chair lifts, the hotels, everything we do other than some snow making at times.

Stan Sorensen

That's awesome.

Dave Fields

But by making that massive investment, we're cutting our carbon footprint in half as an organization. And it won't change the guest experience one bit. But they know that it's the right thing to do for our community to reduce the emissions that we're making for air quality, greenhouse gases. And to ensure that we have reliable power that's as clean as we can get it. We would love to operate the resort off wind power and solar. No doubt about it. And we've studied both of those, but what I love is working for families and for a company in Powder that prioritize the environment.

Dave Fields

I am so appreciative to work for families in a company like Powder that invests in projects like our cogeneration plant at Snowbird or sustainability projects. We do obviously all the recycling you can do in Utah. But we're now experimenting with composting and trying to compost all of our food waste. We also have a program called Play Forever Wednesdays. So each Wednesday throughout the winter, we give \$5 from every lift ticket sold to a local nonprofit. And that sometimes is Clean Air or environmental organizations or accessibility organizations that are bringing the sport to people who wouldn't otherwise have an opportunity. Cottonwood Canyons Foundation, Wasatch Adaptive Sports. And for a company to give that kind of money, you can imagine these dollars add up big time, back to the local community is really amazing. And it makes me super proud to work at Snowbird and lead that organization that is reinvesting in the community and our climate, because we all need to be doing our part on the climate front.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah, yeah. In an industry that is so dependent on water, weather and water basically, or climate is actually a better way to phrase it and water. Some of the work that you've been doing there as well is impressive. As we talk about ongoing drought conditions, change in weather patterns and a lot of those types of topics. I mean, how are you thinking about what life at the resort or what winter at the resort is going to look like? How to maintain enough snow pack, how to get enough snow pack, maintain enough snow pack that you can continue to serve your customers?

Dave Fields

The undeniable fact is that weather is changing. The climate is changing. The low temperatures are higher. The high temperatures are higher. The precipitation is more erratic. One of the big challenges the ski industry faces is you have all this snow making equipment, you have the water ready, but if it's not colder than 28 degrees, you're not making snow. You're just spraying water on the hill.

Stan Sorensen

Right. Yeah, exactly.

Dave Fields

And that doesn't help you at all. And we have gotten a lot better at making snow when it does get cold. If it's two o'clock in the morning, we'll start making snow.

Dave Fields

But the bigger issue and the bigger picture is that snow is less reliable in Utah. And it snows less than it used to. The snow is not as wet or is not as light and dry as it used to be. And we see longer periods of no snow and then higher intensity of snow. These storms that are leaving 60, 70, 80 inches of snow. And that is exactly what climate scientists have been saying for a long time would happen is the weather becomes more extreme. We see more wind, we see rime ice at Snowbird. We never used to. That used to be a very rare occasion. Now you see it much more frequently. And you can imagine when a detachable chairlift is covered in rime ice, how tricky that is to get that broken off and operating. So we're learning on the job as we go how to deal with the effects of climate change.

Dave Fields

We have our own fire truck now. We keep our snow making system energized throughout the peak fire season. So if we had a forest fire coming near us, we could put water out on the hill. Sun Valley did this very well years ago. And it may have saved their resort.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. And I was there for that. Yeah.

Dave Fields

And every aspect of our business has been affected by climate change. And we are doing everything we can to adapt and reduce our imprint on the environment, but also to educate our customers about what they can do. And we're joining every organization locally and nationally on climate and education and supporting legislation that's taking real measures to address climate because we believe that we can't wait for somebody else to deal with this. This is here, it's now. It's real. And we need to do our part.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. And the impact and this, maybe I'm getting on a bit of a soapbox here. So we've talked about climate in a number of podcasts with a number of different folks. Natalie Gotner, and I spent probably five, 10 minutes on this very topic because the impact people need to remember goes beyond the recreation area, the recreation industry. It impacts health. It impacts, I mean, just so many different things. I keep thinking about the health piece, because there's been a lot of articles about how we're expecting more dust storms this year and the impact that that's going to have, et cetera. So I love that Snowbird is doing its part. I consider Snowbird a leader in this. I see other resorts that are doing their part as well. It isn't like they're ignoring it. But a tip of the hat to you for really getting out in front of it, taking a lead and for making your visitors aware not only what you're doing, but what they can do.

Dave Fields

Right. And we have big megaphones with social media. People love to follow ski resort social media. And we can talk to a lot of people. We can talk to people when they're on property, through our social media

channels and other ways. And people want to know that we're doing something. They want to support companies that are taking action. They want to work for companies that are taking action and a quick story. Every year, when we welcome all of our employees back, we stand up and give an update on what's happened in the last year, what we're doing next year, what the priorities are, what we're focusing on.

Dave Fields

And as the main speaker in that event, I can tell you, most of the employees are halfway there, half of them are looking at their phone. All the phones get turned off when our Director of Sustainability, Hilary Arens gets up and talks about what she's working on because our employees want to know what are we doing? How is it working? How is it making a difference? How can they get involved? And I think people take pride in the fact that they work for a company that is spending so much time and energy trying to make a difference. We work in this amazing environment. We work in a watershed, we work in two forests, two counties. We are a big operation and they want to know, okay, what are you doing to make sure that the climate issues are being as addressed as much as possible? The impact on air quality and water quality and recycling and sustainability and energy. People want to know and are very engaged on that topic right now.

Dave Fields

So that is reassuring to me that we're on the right path. We're doing the right thing for the right reasons. And it matters to the right people, which are our employees and our guests.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah, yeah. Is Hilary's job, I asked her this and now I can't remember what she told me. Is her position unique amongst the resorts in Utah or have all of the resorts now hired somebody, maybe not with her background, because she's got a really great background, but have other resorts hire somebody to oversee sustainability?

Dave Fields

I would guess about half of Utah ski resorts have a sustainability position on board and all of them are working on sustainability measures that are unique to their environment. We got really lucky with Hillary because she is a scientist by training. She is a water professional. She is an avid skier, an outdoors person. And if she's not skiing, she's running rivers. And so it is near and dear to her heart and that makes her exceptionally good at what she does. And she's made such a great difference at Snowbird. It's been really fun working with her.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. I just a quick aside on that, I remember, and I think it was the reason I don't remember her answer to that question is because we somehow ended up transitioning over to the work that she's done to do the analysis, soil analysis and all because of all the old mining here, all the mining that had gone on at the canyon and the impact that that has on where you're cutting trails or where you're looking to put new towers and things like that. I thought it was fascinating.

Dave Fields

And what you see when you have a true expert, a credentialed educated expert, when you're dealing with complicated issues like mine tailings or waste rock piles or water impairments, she talks the talk

with the agencies who are trying to address this problem. And we have always stepped up and done everything we could, whether it was the public private partnership back in American Fort Canyon, where we did some waste rock pile and tailing caps that really changed the water quality in American Fort Canyon. We worked with a lot of different agencies and Trout Unlimited and Tiffany and Company. And it was a really neat project because we have resources we can bring to bear. We may have the land ownership or the equipment or the know how to do certain projects. And when you get in that collaborative environment with agencies, you can really make a difference on chronic problems that go back to the 1800s.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. I wonder how many guests are aware of the history of the area. Where there was so much mining that goes on and what's some of the after effects of that.

Dave Fields

Little Cottonwood Canyon was first a mining canyon long before it was a Powder skiing mecca. It was all about mining. And the majority of it took place up at Alta, but it also came down the way Ted Johnson was able to start Snowbird with Dick Bass was by buying mining claims. And that's a lot the property we own, are old mining claims. And if you look at those maps, the mining in the Cottonwood Canyons went everywhere and it's above ground impacts and underground. We store all of our water at the resort, 30 million gallons at a time in a drain tunnel that was built for the mines to drain the water out of the mines. And we plugged each end and we have a water treatment plant in the mine. And that was the solution to store water in a way that didn't involve an above ground water tank. And it's an amazing system.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. I had no idea. That's really cool. That is really cool. Let's maybe talk for just a minute kind of going back to population growth just for a second. There's a lot going on that we've talked about it. We've talked about its impacts and all. Even mentioned transportation pieces and all that sort of thing. You're a lifelong Utah resident. You've seen the growth first-hand. At what point do we sort of just go, it's enough. You can't stop people from moving. I've lived this in the Pacific Northwest. You can't stop people from moving, but at some point people kind of begin to sell select, and all of the reasons why they want to move to an area begin to go away, becomes less appealing. Do you sort of foresee something like that maybe happening to us here in Utah?

Dave Fields

I see growth that is very extreme right now. We have this inflationary economy and where I'm really thinking about it is on things like housing. When we hire employees and they are commuting from an hour away because that's where they can afford to live, it gets less appealing to work up Little Cottonwood Canyon at Snowbird because maybe there's a job that pays the same that's five miles from their house. I think Governor Cox and others in leadership here in the state are taking the foot off the gas pedal of business tax incentives to relocate to Utah. I think they're addressing some of the things that may temper some of the growth somewhat, but there is no question.

Dave Fields

We're sitting here in front of a picture of St. George. It's one of the fastest growing counties in the country. And the growth is unbelievable. And the question is, how are these people going to have water

coming into their homes at all times? Water is a key element for us. We're a snow pack based ecosystem here. That's where we get our water in Utah. So as we see climate changing and the water being less available, we have a real challenge on our hands. As leaders in this community, we have to be thinking about not how am I going to water my lawn today? It's how are we going to have enough water for the people who are moving here because they're coming, whether you like it or not. They're coming.

Dave Fields

Utah is an amazing place to live. We have a lot to offer. And the secret's out. I think for a long time, people stayed away from Utah because they thought we were weird or we had funky liquor laws or whatever. I don't know if it was the Olympics or what did it, but the secret is out and people are aware that Utah is an amazing place to live. And so we have growing pains. We have a lot of infrastructure to deal with and we need to think big. We need to think not how do I like to get places, but what's a way I could get to where I want to go that is sustainable and doesn't have a negative impact on the environment.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. People that listen to that listen to this podcast frequently have heard me say this and they're all going to roll their eyes collectively right now. But I lived 30 plus years in the Seattle area. I watched it go through what we are now going through and I'm of sort of two minds on it. One is there's certain elements of it that we're not getting ahead of. And it's going to be very hard to play catch up. The housing is one of those and housing prices and all of that. And there are a lot of external factors that contribute to that, of course.

Stan Sorensen

But the one that we, I think, have done a very good job of here in Utah is making early investments in infrastructure and transportation and no, it's not perfect. And we have a lot of work to do, but I don't know that we are playing from so far behind as what I experienced 20, 25 years ago up in the Puget Sound region. And that, it gives me some confidence.

Dave Fields

Well, you'll remember, maybe you weren't here at the time. But when it was first proposed to put in Light Rail or Front Runner, they fought hard to get that passed. And there were a lot of skeptics and people who thought it was a waste of time. And now, aren't we glad that we looked down the road at what was coming and looked at alternative means of transportation? We talked about the gondola that's what I see is that people don't know that you can use gondolas for mass transit, but cities around the world are adopting this because they have such density in their communities where they need to get people from point A to point B. It's not feasible to take out houses or go underground where there's infrastructure. They can go above the problem and get people.

Dave Fields

I think, as a community, we need to be open-minded to different ways of getting places that are safe and reliable and clean and last a long time. A bus lasts 15 years. A gondola lasts 50 years. There's some economics at play as well, but as a community, we're so vehicle based, I'm guilty of it too. I drove down here in my Subaru by myself. I didn't use mass transit. We all have to change our way of thinking about getting from point A to point B.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. So, again, another tangent, that the mass transit investment and you sharing the story that we had to fight hard to get Light Rail and Front Runner built. There was a newspaper reporter in the Seattle area, he's long passed, whose entire mantra was if we don't build it, people will stop coming. And he was able to rally people to fight against the bus tunnels and to fight against Light Rail and all of these sorts of things, and it worked. And so again, now you're seeing a region that is playing from way behind as opposed to, I mean, they're still building, in the main commuter corridors, they're still trying to build Light Rail stations that are going to be 5, 6, 7 years down the road. Anyway, it's nice that we're a little bit ahead. I'm just going to leave it at that.

Dave Fields

Yeah. Absolutely. I think transportation and other infrastructure, the job that the legislature's doing addressing the issues with the Great Salt Lake. That's a big deal for this community. We do not want a dry lake bed sitting out there because most of us live down wind from that and you want that thing full of water. You want our reservoirs full. I think in my house, we're thinking about zero escaping and how do we not have all this grass. Do we really need this much grass?

Stan Sorensen

We're doing the same thing. Exactly.

Dave Fields

And I have to admit, I had a little sticker shock at what it costs to zero escape but-

Stan Sorensen

I'm right there with you.

Dave Fields

We are finding ways to get it done so we can reduce our consumption.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. You pointed to the St. George picture here over our shoulder and we're building a, Altabank's building a branch down there on River Road. And up until maybe two months ago, the plan was let's surround it with lawn. And a couple of us kept saying, "Uh-uh. Don't" for all kinds of reasons, including the economic one, which is we're going to get water surcharge like crazy because of the way that they built their water surcharging down there. And so now we've gone back to this idea of, okay, it's all going to be drought tolerant and native plants. And we've now made that decision. I'm hoping that we can actually begin to kind of push that to some of our other branches as well. Because I think it's going to be really beneficial. We can be a leader ourselves in the banking industry on this front.

Dave Fields

Yeah. I don't see any of us having lawns in Utah in 10 years.

Stan Sorensen

Agreed.

Dave Fields

I think that is probably going to be phased out either voluntarily or some other way, because I just don't see us having enough water in the long term in this changing climate.

Stan Sorensen

So Dave, we covered a lot of territory. We've talked about a lot of stuff and I loved it. I mean, this is a great conversation. And again, I really appreciate your being here. What parting thoughts might you have or sort of summary statements would you like to make?

Dave Fields

We've talked a lot about the challenges that we face in Utah, whether it's climate change or growth, but I also, as somebody who's spent all of his 50 years in this state, I just celebrate what an amazing community we have. We're recording this on the Thursday before the PRIDE weekend. And as I look at how the community rallies for that festival, we'll be down there, have an entry in the parade. And as we come out of COVID and we're able to reconnect as a community in ways like that and other events, and we're going to concerts and festivals now, and it's so nice to have the community coming back together and celebrating. I believe Utah's future is really bright. I think we have an amazing economy. We have leaders who are starting to focus on some of these really important issues around climate and growth. And we have an opportunity here to grow in a way that is sustainable. And as a father of two kids, I hope they choose to raise their families in Utah so they can enjoy this amazing place. And I just appreciate the opportunity to be here with you today and have a chance to talk about these important issues.

Stan Sorensen

Yeah. Yeah. Well, and I appreciate it as well. And I will just say with all the negativity that's going on out there right now, ending on a positive note like this is really fantastic. And I appreciate that. I'm grateful that we could do that. And I'm grateful for the opportunity to have a chance to talk with you and for you taking the time to come down and join us as well. So we'll make that a wrap. Dave Fields, thank you again. I can't say it enough. I really do appreciate it. I know you got a lot going on and yeah. So thank you for that.

Stan Sorensen

And for everybody else, I want to thank you for taking the time to listen or watch Altabanking. Be sure to subscribe wherever you get your podcasts. And I appreciate your taking the time to listen to us. We'll talk to you again next time.