



NOT JUST A SKI RESORT:

Inside Crystal Mountain's decades-long diversification project

By Craig Manning

"Diversity is key."

So says John Melcher, CEO of Crystal Mountain Resort in Benzie County, when asked about the ski resort's business model. Amidst increasingly mild northern Michigan winters, Crystal Mountain's leadership has made a push to establish the property as "really, a four-season resort, to help inoculate us against difficult weather patterns," according to Melcher.

As Crystal Mountain approaches its 70th anniversary next year, the TCBN takes a closer look at its evolution – and at how a destination linked with cold temperatures and fresh powder became a hub for everything from golf to mountain biking to real estate.

The early days

Crystal Mountain got its start in 1956, from – of all things – a school project. As the legend goes, Ward Creech, a geography teacher and principal at the nearby Benzonia High School, tasked his students with finding the best spot in Benzie County to establish a ski area. The class settled on a

spot known at the time as the Buck Hills Range, deciding that it "offered the best combination of terrain and snowfall."

The assignment wasn't just hypothetical. Soon, the Buck Hills Ski Area had opened, with three downhill ski trails and a tow rope "powered by an old pickup truck engine."

Four years later, in 1960, a group of 96 investors pooled resources to elevate Buck Hills to a commercial venture, complete with a new lodge, dining, a liquor license, 21 guest rooms, a heated pool and a chairlift. To reflect its expansion, Buck Hills also got a new name: Crystal Mountain Resort.

The four seasons

Though Melcher says a recent string of warm, snow-challenged winters has reaffirmed Crystal Mountain's push to become a four-season resort, the resort

has been moving in that direction for decades. According to the Crystal Mountain website, when ownership of the resort consolidated in 1966, the small group of stewards moved forward with a primary goal of making "this winter playground a sustainable year-round business."

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– John Melcher, CEO, Crystal Mountain Resort

Summer draws in that era included a weekly "Ox Roast," as well as marching band and basketball camps. There was also nightly dinner theater entertainment from a group of college entertainers dubbed "The Crystalettes." In the 1970s, Crystal Mountain opened its first golf course, and the summertime aspects of the resort were off to the races.

According to Melcher, longtime Crystal Mountain owners Jim and Chris MacInnes have kept the four-season aspect of the resort near the top of the priorities list for the past 30 years. That emphasis on non-winter

activities has led to two popular 18-hole golf courses, a spa that is regularly ranked as one of the top 100 in the nation by Spas of America, an outdoor water park, a climbing wall, an elevated rope and zipline course, and the only alpine slide in the state of Michigan. The resort is also the venue for "a whole host of other activities in programming throughout the year," Melcher says, including the Total Archery Challenge, the North Mitten running races, the Michigan Women's Golf Open and the Peak2Peak Mountain Bike Classic.

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Many of the above attractions have come online since 2000, including the launch of the water park in 2004, the introduction of the "Crystal Coaster" alpine slide in 2008, and a rebuild and reintroduction of the slide – now with a two-track design – just last year.

It's not just recreation that is driving the year-round business, either.

"Another important component of this strategy is our 32,000-square-foot meeting and conference space, the Crystal Center," Melcher noted. "We host different conferences and meeting groups there,

and do a lot of wedding and private parties throughout the year.”

While Melcher declines to share what percentage of the resort’s business still comes from ski season, he says that all the diversification has helped stabilize Crystal Mountain to the point where a substantial amount of its traffic now comes during the non-winter months.

“We probably have 350,000 to 400,000 people that visit us on an annual basis, and that would include skiers, golfers, hotel guests, conference groups and people showing up for our events,” Melcher said. “Obviously, in winter, we can host more people here, because we’ve got more room on the ski slopes to have skiers and guests. We’ve got a more limited number that we can put on our golf courses. But I will say, an event like the Total Archery Challenge, where we’ll have the day skier parking lots full, that really draws a lot of people, too.”

The winter problem

Thanks to climate change, winter in northern Michigan ain’t what it used to be – at least not on a consistent basis. While last winter brought significant snowfall and cold temperatures, it came on the heels of the warmest winter in northern Michigan history – a winter that saw 73-degree temperatures in February and full-season snowfall numbers that were dozens of inches lower than average.

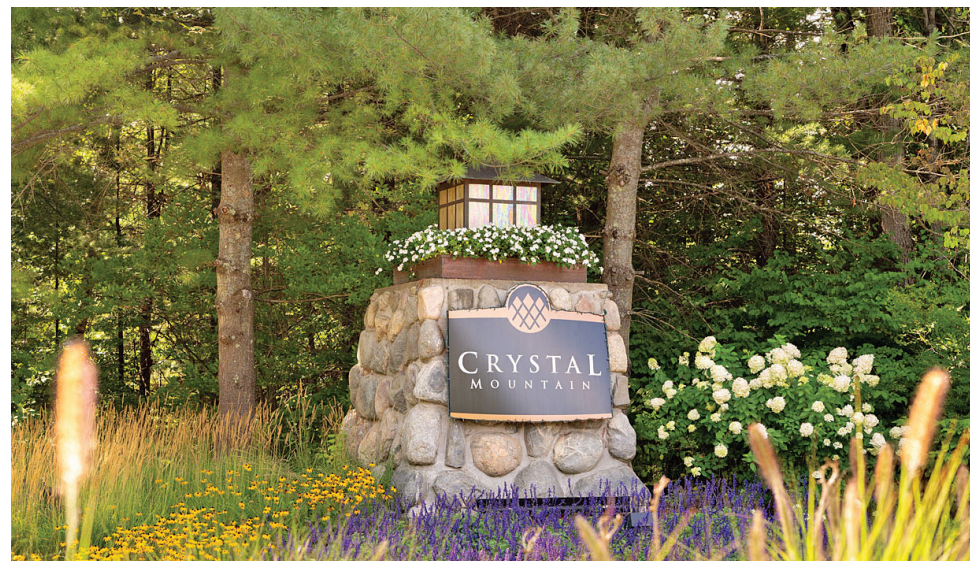


Chris and Jim MacInnes

That winter ended with 42 Michigan counties getting federal drought declarations, opening the door for local ski areas like Mt. Holiday to apply for Economic Injury Disaster Loans.

“Mitigating that weather risk has certainly been a priority the last couple of years,” Melcher acknowledged, not just in terms of “building out more non-winter activities,” but also in shoring up the resort’s snowmaking capabilities – and ramping up marketing to let people know that, even in the bad winters, Crystal Mountain has ski-ready slopes.

“Two years ago, when we had that really bad winter, one of our key campaigns was just saying, ‘We have snow,’ and letting



people know what our snow depths were,” Melcher said.

While Melcher is hoping for another good winter in 2025-26, he says Crystal Mountain is ready for anything. In addition to new improvements to the resort’s snowmaking systems, Crystal Mountain is also making a push this winter to establish one of its core summertime activities as a year-round opportunity.

“We’ve been looking at golf simulator technology for some time, and now we’re finally bringing golf simulators into our Kinlochen golf pro shop,” Melcher said. “That’ll be ready to go and open by Thanksgiving week, and it will allow folks to take a lesson with our golf pros

– or even just enjoy a round of golf with family and friends – all winter long. Alternatively, for folks that might be going on a winter trip down south, it’s a great opportunity to get a lesson in before they head to Florida or wherever they may be going.”

“If you look at the growth of golf right now, certainly there’s on-course growth, but there’s also been a huge growth with Top Golf and what I’ll call ‘entertainment golf,’” Melcher added.

He sees the implementation of simulators at Crystal Mountain as a good way to take advantage of that growth, and hopefully convert those people into “on-course golfers.”

A bright future?

Despite the declining reliability of northern Michigan winters, Melcher is optimistic about the future of Crystal Mountain.

In recent years, he says, Crystal Mountain has seen an uptick in traffic thanks to “the increased interest in outdoor activities that we saw during the pandemic,” including new skiers, new golfers and new mountain bikers finding their way to the resort for the first time. Helping that trend, he thinks, is northern Michigan’s growing tourism machinery.

“We’re part of a group in the summertime called ‘America’s Summer Golf Capital,’ where the golf properties up here in northern Michigan band together and work on getting the word out to the southern part of the United States,” Melcher said. “If you’re in Texas in the middle of July or August, it’s probably not a great experience playing golf with the heat down there. We’re doing a lot of targeted outreach to those folks down there to bring them here. And certainly, with all the growth happening at Cherry Capital Airport, and all the new direct flights that we now have to Traverse, there’s a pretty good pipeline to get those people here, too.”

First Tracks will replace the building that houses the Mountain Operations Center.

That bullish outlook is reflected in Crystal Mountain’s future plans, including the resort’s latest expansion. That project, called “The North Village,” officially broke ground in October. In addition to adding new residential cottages to the property, the North Village will be anchored by “First Tracks,” described in Crystal Mountain materials as “a slope-side, skier-focused mixed-use building.” The main level will include commercial elements such as a snow sports school, equipment rental, a retail component, and a food and beverage component. The upper two floors, Melcher says, will be “luxury residential.”

First Tracks will replace the building that currently houses Crystal Mountain’s “Mountain Operations Center,” which serves as the hub for snowmaking, grooming and upkeep operations. Those capacities will be relocated to a new space, also part of the North Village development.

Part resort, part real estate company

Leading the charge on the North Village project is Crystal Properties, Crystal Mountain’s in-house real estate development company. Crystal Properties also houses Crystal Mountain Realty, a full-service real estate agency. Together, those two elements constitute a whole other arm of Crystal Mountain Resort that Melcher says often goes overlooked by resort visitors.

“One thing that a lot of folks don’t realize is that we look at ourselves as community,” Melcher explained. “We’ve got four different neighborhoods within the boundaries of the resort, where there are single-family houses throughout. We’ve got a lot of residents that have retired up here and now live here year-round, or maybe it’s a second home. And then, with the advent of remote work over the last few years, we’ve seen people move up here full time, even though they’re still employed somewhere else. So, we’ve got all these thriving residential neighborhoods around the resort.”

Melcher estimates that Crystal has 500 housing units on property, spanning more than 700 property owners, with some condominiums that are fractionally owned in quarter or eighth shares. About 260 units, meanwhile, are in a rental management program, which Crystal Mountain spearheads.

“So, when you come to stay at Crystal, most of our lodging is owned by others, and we manage that,” Melcher said. “That is something that people don’t typically think of when they think of coming to the resort.”



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Succession?

With so many irons in the fire at Crystal Mountain, and so much focus on the future, what’s the resort’s succession plan?

Chris MacInnes, who serves as president for both Crystal Properties and Crystal Enterprises, the company that operates the resort, has been with the resort since 1985. The daughter of long-time owners George and Althea Petritz, MacInnes moved back to Michigan from southern California to join the family business. Her husband, Jim MacInnes, came with her, and is currently chairman of the resort’s board.

The Petritz/MacInnes family has been involved at Crystal since its beginning, and has been the lone owner since 1981. According to the resort’s website, in 1981 sole ownership of Crystal Mountain came down to a “... coin flip between George Petritz and Robert Meyer. The winner would make the first offer, leaving it to

the other to accept or counter. Mr. Petritz won the toss, made an offer which Mr. Meyer accepted.”

Despite that lengthy tenure, the MacInneses have stepped back from day-to-day leadership roles in recent years. Melcher was hired in 2017 to succeed Chris MacInnes as chief operating officer, and then moved into the CEO role in 2021 when Jim MacInnes stepped back from day-to-day operations after 36 years in resort operations.

“As far as succession planning goes, that’s one of the reasons that that I’m here,” Melcher said. “They’ve got me, and also Karyn Thorrr, who is our chief operating officer, to focus on the day-to-day. But the family is still very engaged in the business, and their vision for the mountain continues to be building a thriving community that serves families – and that includes our guests, our employees, the homeowners and the whole region.”