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*Guest
Commentary,
Denver*

Weakness of urban snowpark

The ink wasn't even dry on Intrawest's public relations coup at Ruby Hill Park last weekend when a boarder laid a proverbial egg on the ski giant's attempt to provide a much-needed youth gateway to Colorado snowsports.

Joaquin Sanchez, 30, told a Denver Post reporter that he can't afford to get up to the mountains more than once a year, but he bought a used snowboard and boots in a pawnshop a few years back and is excited to use the new hill. "I can't wait. I don't have to go to the mountains now," he said.

What? Isn't that point of an urban snowpark? To get folks invested in mountain recreation so they will develop an affinity for mountains, become future customers of the snowsports industry and ultimately avail themselves of the educational benefits mountain recreation experiences offer? To ensure future generations of Colorado young people will protect the legacy of our national parks and forests as adults?

How dare Sanchez steal thunder from Intrawest/Winter Park's media hype, intended to divert attention from the more serious problem that is occurring among Denver youth: According to the Colorado Association for Health, Physical Education, Recreation and Dance, some 90 percent of Denver kids never get to the mountains during their entire youth.

For as cool as I think "the nation's first urban rail yard" is, it's come at the cost of serious expansion of Denver Parks and Recreation's current snowsports program at Winter Park, a program that last year created actual mountain snowsports experiences for 1,261 kids. That program could have doubled in size during the 2006-07 season, but took a back seat to Intrawest's "vision" for a more publicly visible entity like Ruby Hill.

By contrast, Aspen — with a base of 1.4 million skiers (Intrawest does over 2 million skier visits) — provides 9,000 skier visits to underserved kids in the Roaring Fork Valley. Vail Resorts provides 1,500 visits for underserved kids in Denver. Neither company is dependent on a publicly owned ski hill for 50 percent of its skier visits, as is the case with Intrawest/Winter Park.

So why did Intrawest opt to create the "urban rail yard"? You do the math. On a dollar-for-dollar basis, it's obvious Intrawest/Winter Park gets more PR hype from opening "the nation's first urban rail yard" than from doubling actual snowsports visits offered to Denver kids. Schlepping kids to the mountains doesn't generate anywhere near the media attention garnered by opening an urban snowboarding Disneyland smack dab in the middle of Denver.

Since we now know the most immediate threat to our mountains is an ambivalent electorate with no historic involvement or affinity for mountains, the only way kids develop such an affinity is by actually getting to those mountains. As America moves to a "minority majority" in 25-30 years, the most immediate enemy of our legacy of our national forests is a generation of adults who will simply sell those forests because they have no historical attachment to them. So comments by Sanchez should be troubling to the Forest Service and a snowsports industry whose numbers have been flat for 30 years.

More troubling for Denver is that a non-scientific survey of those attending the Ruby Hill opening found a majority of the kids were from places like Lakewood, Highlands Ranch and other non-Denver communities. They were also overwhelming non-minority, and we all know the student population of Denver is overwhelmingly minority. So where were the Denver kids?

Ruby Hill could be made greater if it were supported by a concurrent expansion of much needed, actual on-mountain snowsports experiences. It certainly would have been wiser to create the experience in cooperation with Colorado Ski Country and challenge all of Colorado's 26 ski areas to participate. Colorado Ski Country involvement could have brought economies of scale that might have made more on-mountain experiences available and allow the "park" to reflect professional rather than voluntary staff, helping with monitoring safety and liability issues.

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