



# Can skiing save Valdez, Alaska?

What happens when an oil town runs out of oil? 4,353 residents are about to find out. Next question: Can snow replace crude as the economy's main lubricant?

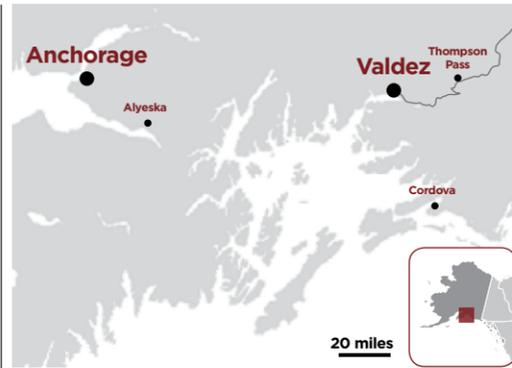
BY DEVON O'NEIL

H<sub>2</sub>O guide Mike Hamilton in steep decline as the sun sets over Prince William Sound.



**Above:** After 20 years working in the Chugach, world champion skier, heli-operator, and entrepreneur Dean Cummings has a vision for Valdez that includes a 126-person tram and a ski resort in the heart of town.

**Opposite:** Ryan McCune has his own plans for his hometown: a booming resort economy fueled by a 5,500-acre ski mountain five miles out of town.



Alyeska oil terminal across the bay tell the other side of this town's story. Lest a gaping outsider forget, Valdez is not a ski town. It is what longtime resident and former city councilman Gay Dunham calls "a one-business town," based on a three-letter word: oil.

And Valdez is not booming, as the powder and scenery might make you expect. On the contrary, one of the most iconic adventure meccas on earth is in danger of drying up. Not now, but soon. The Trans-Alaska oil pipeline, which terminates in Valdez and contributes tens of millions of tax dollars to the city's economy, has seen its output slow to less than a third of what it once was—from 2.1 million barrels a day in 1988 to 600,000 today. The ownership conglomerate of BP, ExxonMobil, and ConocoPhillips, among others, has automated much of the pipeline to increase profits. People are losing their jobs or, if they're lucky enough to be employed, their monthly cost-of-living stipends that were covered by the pipeline company. Prices have skyrocketed in the local grocery store, where two plums cost five dollars. Summer cruise-ship traffic has plummeted from a high of 96 ports of call several years ago to a lonely one in 2010. Perhaps most telling, four bars have gone out of business in less than a decade.

"We're dying on the vine here," says Paula McCann, an ex-oil worker turned tourism promoter. "We can be so much more. The oil might stop flowing, but the snow's not going to stop falling."

She shrugs and says what everyone says. "Something's got to be done."

**One potential solution** is a gas line that would run alongside the 800-mile oil pipeline and terminate in Valdez, but that would just get the city back on the energy-economy boom-and-bust cycle. Another is lift-served skiing—a polarizing subject that has been debated among Valdez's 4,353 residents since the mid-1980s.

For the past decade, Ryan McCune, a born-and-raised local snowboarder who's charged the Chugach since he was a teenager, has been working toward installing a three-mile-long chairlift on East Peak, five miles from town. He's exhausted his savings and, at times, his heart, trying to rescue his hometown.

But this wouldn't be just any ski area. With up to 7,000 vertical feet and 5,500 acres of skiable terrain,



Court Leve (2)

the resort would boast twice the drop of Aspen and more acreage than Vail. Some of the runs would tilt in excess of 50 degrees, delivering Valdez's pulse-racing adrenaline but for a fraction of heli-skiing's high cost. If executed as envisioned, some skiers say McCune's resort could offer an experience similar to the steep-skiing kingdom of La Grave, France.

To install the lift as well as all the infrastructure at the base, where he owns 100 acres adjacent to public land, McCune, 36, believes he's going to need a massive amount of capital—money he, as the town's cable repairman, doesn't have. And despite widespread support from the locals, the city government, which comprises mainly nonskiers and balks at McCune's sometimes abrasive demeanor, has yet to buy into his plan, financially or through a show of public support. "We're talking a \$100 million project," McCune says. "Without the city saying they want to put in a ski resort, nobody's going to put up that kind of money."

The other recent development has been a shrewdly orchestrated plan by extreme skier and developer Dean Cummings, who wants to build a tram on the 5,300-foot Mile High Mountain that beanstalks straight from the heart of town. Cummings, 46, has spent 20 years in Valdez as a heli-guide and operator, during which he's gained a reputation for cutthroat business dealings. Most of the locals would prefer to

see McCune's project happen before Cummings's, but Cummings has already found a potential investor to back his tram, so some consider it to be the more realistic possibility.

And so it stands in Valdez: the blue-collar snowboarder and the world-champion skier, one a native and the other an import, rivals from way back, racing to prove that lift-served skiing, of all things, can deliver the salvation everyone has been seeking for decades. It's a complex issue, one that evokes passion from everyone whether they ski 100 days a year or have never been off the highway. And with each passing day, the oil dries up a little more, drawing residents nearer to a time that will determine not just their town's fate, but their way of life.

**Almost every town in Alaska** has some boom-bust element to its history, but none can match Valdez, located at the end of the Richardson Highway 306 miles by car from Anchorage, which, with not quite 300,000 residents, is still Alaska's largest city. Founded by gold and copper miners in the late 1800s, Valdez's population would look like a roller coaster if plotted on a graph. Much of that instability has been due to disasters, natural and otherwise.

On Good Friday, 1964, the town endured a

With up to 7,000 vert and 5,500 acres, McCune's proposed resort would boast **twice the drop of Aspen and more terrain than Vail.**



Mike Barney, a Valdez Heli Camps guide, commits to a line near Cornerstone.

Jeff Cricco (2)

horrifying five-minute earthquake that measured 9.2 on the Richter scale, killed 32 people and obliterated the town. It remains the most violent quake in North America's history.

Twenty-five years later another catastrophe struck, again on Good Friday. The infamous 1989 Exxon Valdez oil spill, caused when the 987-foot tanker smashed into Bligh Reef in Prince William Sound at midnight, almost tripled the town's population overnight with emergency responders and support staff. The sludge never actually touched any of Valdez's shoreline, but it didn't matter. The cleanup was headquartered there, and the name Valdez became forever associated with the remote wilderness sound we saw blanketed in oily black muck on our television screens.

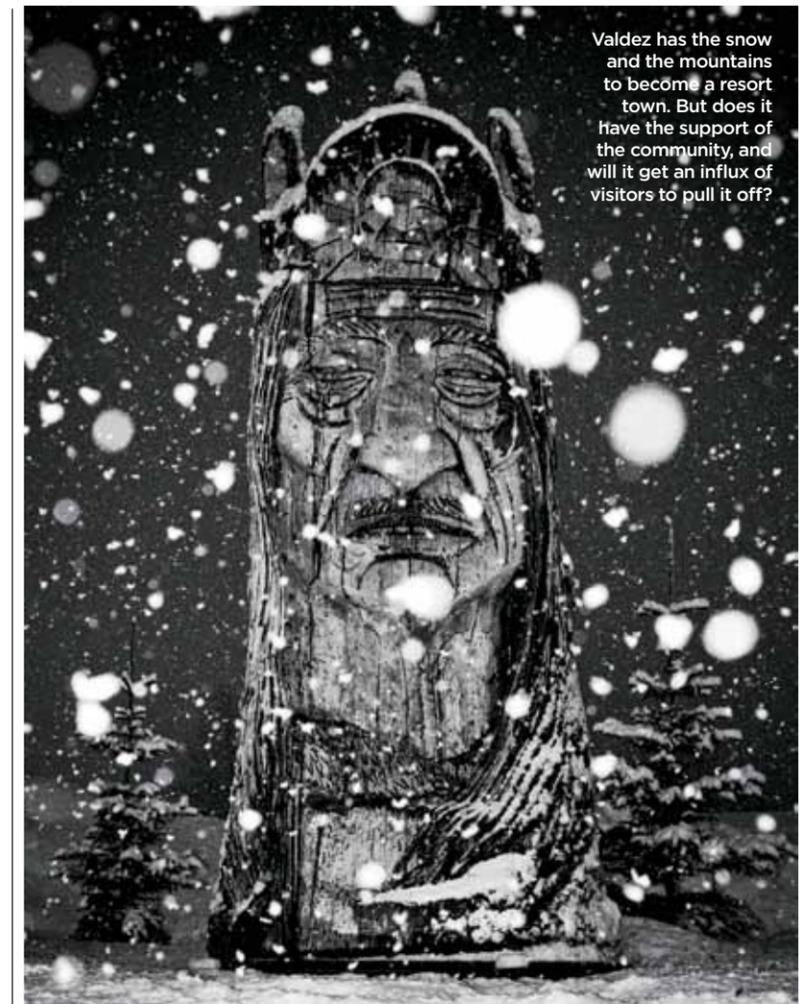
Of course, this was the furthest possibility from Valdez residents' minds when the pipeline was completed in 1977, providing jobs, stability, and dreamy small-town Alaskan life to people who would otherwise struggle to make a home in the Chugach. But despite the energy and hope it delivered, the pipeline's opening came with a heavy warning: There would only be enough oil to last 20 years. After that, town residents would have to find a new solution.

There weren't many skiers in Valdez back then—and there are still only about 200 in a town of about 4,000—but those who were around never had trouble finding time to make some turns. They called themselves the Ski to Die Club; Chet Simmons, a Vietnam War helicopter pilot who flew supplies to the Alaskan interior during the pipeline's construction, was one of the leaders, as was John McCune, an Ohio transplant and pipeline worker with a "double-A-dominant wolverine personality" that Simmons admired, and who would become the father of Ryan McCune.

They popularized the now-famous Road Run on Thompson Pass and made dozens of first descents on the nearby peaks. (Simmons later acquired a helicopter to help with the oil-spill cleanup and used it to fly Doug Coombs, Dean Cummings, and the rest of the early renegades into their lines, thus launching the Alaskan heli-skiing movement. Cost: \$25 a run.)

Realizing the potential for something bigger, Simmons, McCune, and the other long-haired hippie ski bums brought a proposal to the city government in the late '70s to build a chairlift on Sugarloaf Mountain, across the bay near the pipeline terminal. The local officials at that time were in the midst of conjuring a way to avoid total collapse when the 20 years of oil ran out. They ordered a feasibility study, part of which involved installing a rope tow on Thompson Pass. It was later moved down to Salmonberry Ridge just outside town. Skiing's popularity boomed in Valdez. The Road Run was jammed, kids hit the rope tow after school—it was *happening*.

In the end, although city officials seriously considered funding the Sugarloaf project, they instead used millions of public dollars to build a series of grain silos, which they believed they could rent out to farmers from up north and start building the



Valdez has the snow and the mountains to become a resort town. But does it have the support of the community, and will it get an influx of visitors to pull it off?

framework for a revitalized local economy.

When asked if the silos had ever been used, then-five-term mayor Bert Cottle said, "Yeah, for radio towers and rappelling practice."

The Sugarloaf Mountain chairlift plan never materialized after the city decided not to fund it, and in 1986, a 15-year-old girl who'd been drinking crashed off a jump at Salmonberry, paralyzing herself. She sued the city, which paid a large sum of money to the girl's family. In the eyes of the majority of city leaders, that pretty much ended the mainstream skiing movement in Valdez.

*There are only a handful of people* in Valdez who call Ryan McCune by either his first or last name. Everyone else calls him Rydor. His friend Donny Mills, another Valdez native and one of the best snowboarders ever to ride the Chugach, says of the nickname, "He had so many girlfriends that it just stuck."

My first night in town, Rydor invited me for a beer at his house on 19 Mile, halfway up Thompson Pass. He built it outside the city limits to avoid paying the high local property taxes. It has plywood floors

The pipeline's opening came with a warning: There would only be enough oil to last 20 years. After that, the town was on its own.



**Above:** The Chugach Mountains march down to the Valdez Small Boat Harbor, not far from the end of the pipeline.

**Opposite:** Life and art converge for heli-guide Mike Barney near the Shoup Glacier during filming for Level 1 Productions.

and no running water. His closet is jammed with 19 snowboards—all of them handmade by Mills, most emblazoned with Rydor.com stickers, the site where his proposed resort is explained in great detail. Rydor’s well-known acrylic paintings are scattered about the place, including a current work on an easel. They’re all of big Chugach peaks, full of rich colors. A sticker on his wall reads: When Hell Freezes Over, I’ll Ride There Too!

He and Donny are deep into a Foster’s 12-pack. They have dirt under their nails. Donny’s truck windshield is spiderwebbed from hitting a moose a few nights prior. Rydor rolls a cigarette, then begins the nutshell version of his life story.

He learned to board when he was 10 from Tim Windell, who founded Windells action sports camps. His father and stepmother skied as much as they could, and so did he. He doesn’t keep track, but he estimates he’s always gotten between 100 and 150 days a season.

His parents launched the World Extreme Skiing Championships in the early 1990s and ran the event for years. Rydor was extremely close to his father, which is why so much changed on September 17, 1996. John McCune and a friend were sheep hunting on the Hawkins Glacier near McCarthy, Alaska, when their plane crashed, killing them both.

“John’s death affected Ryan hugely,” says Karen Stewart, Rydor’s stepmother, who still plays a large role in his life. “I don’t think he ever got over that. Part of the reason he wants to build this ski resort is because of his dad.”

It’s easy to see why Rydor is loved around town—

why he’s “everybody’s bro,” honest, reliable, the kind of local you want taking you into the burly Chugach, as high school football coach and longtime skier Steve Radotich says. Three springs ago, he swung down a cliff on the Berlin Wall, unharnessed, to rescue a friend’s puppy, which had gotten stranded halfway up the 4,000-foot mountain. “Anyone could have done it,” Rydor says. Later that summer, with zero fanfare, he won the big-mountain competition at the World Heli Challenge in New Zealand.

Rydor claims he has invested \$300,000 into his Chugach Mountain Recreation Center project, not including time. After depleting his life savings, he borrowed from his stepmother to purchase 100 acres from the city for \$150,000 in early 2007. He has met with state and federal land managers, in addition to the city government; he even rented a booth at the SIA trade show one year, trying to market his project. Still, progress has been excruciatingly slow because he doesn’t have financial backing for the lift.

Given that, I ask if, at the end of each day, he still feels the resort will happen. “Oh, it’s going to happen,” he says, dead serious. “It has to happen. This town is swirling around the bowl. It’s just a matter of when and how, and how much control I’ll have to give up.”

### *Dean Cummings still remembers*

competing at the inaugural WESC, in 1991. He had just secured his spot on the U.S. Ski Team. Coombs won; he took second. “My lines were so insane,” he says. “I was so happy.” We are sitting in the lobby of

Jeff Cricco (2)

the latest hotel to house his business, H<sub>2</sub>O Guides; over the years, he’s used every hotel in town. Cummings won the WESC in 1995, the same year he launched H<sub>2</sub>O, which he conceived at the McCunes’ dinner table while living with them. He has done well for himself in Valdez; he’s raising a family while developing a 50-acre plot of lakeside property at 6 Mile, and he spreads the snow-safety gospel throughout Alaska and the Lower 48.

But if you speak to enough people in town, you’ll start to hear stories of what an aggressive entrepreneur like Cummings will do to advance his ventures. “He’s burned a lot of bridges here,” says Mike Buck, Valdez’s snowmobile search-and-rescue guru, who has known Cummings since he moved to town.

Cummings, for his part, defends his reputation, particularly among other heli-operators—the ones “stuck in the wind corridors,” as he puts it. “If they’d be willing to work as hard as I do, I don’t think they’d have much to say about me.”

We walk outside and Cummings points up to East Peak. “That’s Rydor’s lift. It’s too low in elevation. It can rain up there. And if there’s more than a foot of snow, snowboarders can’t make it across that bench. It’d be better if we worked together and did something like this.” He pivots and points at his tram site on Mile High.

Cummings wants to install a 126-person tram and possibly another lift on the north side of the peak, where there is more moderate terrain than in the Chamonix-style, south-facing summit bowl. “Just in that bowl, you could fit two Steamboats,” he says.

Despite what he said about East Peak, Cummings regularly runs heli groups on Rydor’s proposed resort site. Rydor doesn’t care for Cummings. One day he was leading a snowcat tour when Cummings landed above them. “I was calling his office, saying, ‘Go someplace f\*\*\*ing else,’” Rydor says. “We’re out there with a 10,000-pound vibrator in waist-deep snow, and he’s landing up on top of us running groups. And his response was, if anything happens, we’ll come save you. I don’t think I’ve talked to him since then.” (Cummings denies he put anyone at risk that day and maintains Rydor’s group was still at the base of the mountain.)

Says Cummings of Rydor, “I don’t have any description of him. I’ve always liked him and respected him. That’s all I can say about that.” A minute later he adds, “I knew Rydor a long time ago when he was a little boy. One time I took him moose hunting and was just like, wow, what a trippy guy.” Three weeks after my visit, Cummings called to request that he not be pitted against Rydor in the story. “I’m not out to compete with Rydor,” he said. “I don’t agree that there’s only room for one here.”

Chet Simmons, who knows both men well, puts it this way: “Rydor lives here, and Dean just got here. And Dean will always have just gotten here.”

### *It is a well-known fact*

in Valdez that the city has \$130 million locked away in a “permanent” fund. “That is there for the future of Valdez,” says Dave Cobb, who is serving his second term as may-

“Oh, the resort is going to happen. It has to happen. This town is swirling around the bowl.”



Mark Abma does what comes naturally in the mountains surrounding Valdez.

**“One of the reasons I got on city council is so Valdez will survive after oil. I don’t want to go down in history as being stupid.”**

or. It would take a public referendum for the city to commit any finances toward a ski resort, Cobb says, noting that people haven’t forgotten about past financial disasters. “The Salmonberry accident was definitely in the back of our minds when Rydor and Dean brought their projects to us,” he says. Nevertheless, this past spring the city council allocated \$120,000 to build a new rope tow on the same Salmonberry site, after a group of locals led by Karen Cummings, Dean’s wife, pledged to help run it. The decision represented a small victory for lift-served skiing and was enabled by a change in liability laws that lessened the city’s risk, Cobb says.

The grander goal remains for McCune and Cummings. Perhaps their biggest ally on council is Karen Ables, owner of the Landing Lights airport bar. “This resort up here,” she says of the East Peak project over beers, “that’s what we need! I am so about supporting these two guys. That’s one of the reasons I got on council, so Valdez will survive after oil. We have to activate our winter tourism. I don’t want to go down in history as being stupid.”

Locals glimpsed the potential each of the past three years, when Tailgate Alaska, a spring free-riding festival based on Thompson Pass, brought dozens of the world’s best pros to town. Valdez was buzzing. Hotels were full. Bars and restaurants were jammed. In 2010, a handful of big-name riders even showed up at a city council meeting to encourage

Valdez to support building a ski resort.

Yet the impending doom lingers like the foul smell of spilled crude. Lisa Von Bargaen, the city’s economic development director, says, “I lay awake worrying. Valdez has had the luxury of knowing for 33 years that the mainstay of our economy was going to be gone after 20. And here we are 13 years past that, and we still have not come up with a strategic plan for our future.”

Ryan McCune is trying to form a nonprofit program titled “Go Valdez: The World’s Best Backcountry.” He hopes it will rally the community around his project, helping him pursue grant funding. Both his and Cummings’s sites have undergone successful feasibility studies. And yet the money needed to undertake either project remains out of reach.

True to their stubborn natures, the people who live at the end of the road in one of the world’s most radical mountain ranges continue to believe. “Valdez will become a big, badass resort town,” Cummings predicts. “The beauty doesn’t even compare.”

Some talk about opening restaurants near the resort or finally having a ski shop in town. Others have more modest goals.

“I hope it happens in my lifetime, because I want to work there,” says Karen Stewart, 58, who grew up skiing in Colorado and works for the pipeline. “I want to be a liftie. I’ve got a bunch of old gal friends here. I’m like, ‘You guys! We could be lifties!’” ♦