

Province using tax money to groom ski hills, resorts say

By Andrew Duffy
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Ontario ski resort owners claim the provincial government is crowding the slopes.

Denouncing the government for "unfair competitive practices," the Ontario Ski Resorts Association yesterday called on it to sell its taxpayer-financed ski hill, Big Thunder, in Thunder Bay.

"This is a blatant example of government-funded competition with the private sector," said Don McIlveen, executive director of the association.

"Ontario taxpayers should not be subsidizing skiing for a lucky few."

Big Thunder's board of directors received a \$750,000 grant from the province last year.

The government, however, rejects the suggestion that tax dollars are being used to subsidize recreational skiers.

"I understand the board opened the ski hill to raise money, not to be a drain on the

government," said Gerry Ker, director of the provincial recreation program.

Three privately owned ski resorts in the Thunder Bay area have lost more than \$120,000 since Big Thunder opened to the public last March, McIlveen told a Queen's Park news conference.

The province bought the resort in 1983 and has operated it — through an independent board — as a training facility for competitive skiers and ski-jumpers.

Last year, however, the board voted to open the facility to the public. Since then, it has consistently offered ski passes at prices lower than the private hills.

Big Thunder offers a one-day ski pass for \$25 and a half-day pass for \$17.50. At nearby Loch Lomond and Candy Mountain resorts, it's \$30 for a one-day ticket and \$25 for a half-day.

Big Thunder also offers a \$95 package that includes four days of skiing, four lunches and 16 hours of lessons.

Private operators say they can't hope to match the deal.

Local ski operators are also enraged by an attempt to "buy them out" of a lucrative ski program catering to elementary school children.

Big Thunder officials have offered to pay consultant fees to the three private owners if they agree to give up their ski-school business.

"In effect, I'd become a government employee," said Ward Bond, owner of the Candy Mountain ski resort in Thunder Bay. "It means the taxpayer will be paying us so that Big Thunder can justify its existence."

The ski resorts association, which represents 75 operators, has asked the government to sell them Big Thunder. McIlveen said an independent appraiser should be brought in to set a price.

"We feel it would make good sense for the ski hill operators in Thunder Bay and it would be much less costly to the taxpayer."