

King of the hills

Sandpoint named top ski town

Posted: Saturday, January 21, 2012 10:00 am By CAMERON RASMUSSEN Staff writer



SANDPOINT — Rand McNally just can't get enough of Sandpoint.

First, the atlas publisher teamed up with USA Today this summer to name Sandpoint the most beautiful small town in America. This week, Rand McNally readers continued their love affair with the community by naming Sandpoint the top ski town of the season.

“This kind of came out of nowhere — we had no idea that voting was even going on,” Schweitzer Mountain marketing director Sean Briggs said. “Everyone around the mountain was thrilled by the news.”

Rand McNally readers determined the top towns by logging onto the publication's website and submitting ratings and reviews. Their efforts boosted Sandpoint to the top of the heap, edging out South Lake Tahoe, Calif., Park City, Utah, Bangor, Maine, Glenwood Springs, Colo., Mammoth Lakes, Calif., and Jackson, Wyo., for the prize.

The honor is a crowning jewel for the mountain resort currently enjoying an abundance of fresh powder. After a big November snowfall, the resort got a head start on the season by opening the weekend before Thanksgiving. As a result, resort officials were able to open huge amounts of acreage early in the season.

“For about two weeks in December, we were the biggest ski resort open in the nation,” Briggs said. “That was pretty incredible.”

Although Briggs said the unusually dry weather that followed the early opening challenged Schweitzer, the resort still consistently had skiable slopes. That was more than could be said for many U.S. ski mountains, and as a result, families across the country canceled their regularly scheduled trips to visit Sandpoint instead.

“A fluke of nature became our great boon,” Greater Sandpoint Chamber of Commerce President Kate McAlister said.

McAlister said she'd received emails from visitors who spoke highly of their vacation. In one case, an entire busload of visitors indicated that the local public transportation system and ski resort made their return very likely. Similarly, ski teams and organizations abandoned their normal event locales and rented hill space on Schweitzer. For instance, according to Briggs, the mountain hosted a fair-sized ski race last week.

The out-of-town visitors were a valuable source of revenue when many regulars opted to stay home.

“I would definitely say they had a big impact,” Briggs said. “We noticed our locals weren't skiing as much, but we did see a lot of people changing their vacation plans. That really helped us out.”

Beyond the increased revenue, however, the out-of-town activity provided a rare marketing opportunity. For many visitors, this winter was their first exposure to Sandpoint.

“They’re going to go back and tell their friends and family about this great place they never knew existed,” Briggs said. “That’s the best kind of marketing there is.”

The award and the extra exposure aren’t just good news for Schweitzer, according to McAlister. More business on the mountain means a bigger economic boost for the entire town. After so much positive publicity in recent months, McAlister predicted that good times were imminent for the entire community.

“So many positive things are happening in this town that soon, we’ll be spilling over with greatness,” she said