



SUPERIOR HIGHLAND BACKCOUNTRY

Strategic Funding Road Map



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OUR WHY: REIMAGINING ACCESS TO THE BACKCOUNTRY

Minnesota's North Shore is known for its wild beauty, with snow-covered ridgelines, dense forests, and sweeping views of Lake Superior. But for many, the backcountry remains hard to reach: trails are overcrowded, access points unclear, and the experience often feels out of step with ecological responsibility or community benefit.

At the same time, rural towns across the region are looking for ways to diversify their economies in ways that reflect their values, support their residents, and preserve the landscapes that make this place special.

Superior Highland Backcountry (SHB) was founded in 2017 to bridge that gap. What began as a grassroots effort in Finland has grown into a broader movement that weaves together recreation, stewardship, and rural revitalization. Our approach is local, low-impact, and deeply rooted in community.



OUR ORIGINS

SHB was founded in 2017 by Rory Scoles, a lifelong adventurer who entered the alpine ski industry in 2006 and acquired the [Lutsen Pro Shop](#) in 2011. Combining technical know-how with a love of the wilderness, Rory and Elli King-Gallager launched SHB with one core belief: the Midwest had a backcountry ski community ready to be activated.

From the North Shore to the Twin Cities, the response confirmed it. Events filled. Fundraisers sold out. Classes drew eager learners –some seasoned skiers chasing local powder, others curious newcomers exploring winter in a new way.

Minnesota may lack dramatic peaks, but it's full of passionate skiers. As we've introduced more people to backcountry skiing, one thing's clear: the stoke is real.

The questions might begin with "Wait, what is backcountry skiing?" but they almost always end in shared excitement and a strong desire to learn, connect, and get out there.

THE RISK AND OPPORTUNITY

Without action, the risks are real: the residents of the Midwest will take their business elsewhere, those who cannot afford out-of-state travel will be excluded, and our valuable natural resource of public, skiable terrain will lie unused, or be developed for private, exclusive, or paid use.

But the opportunity is one that is just waiting to happen.

SHB was founded on faith that there was a community of people in the Midwest who were ready to realize the potential that we saw. We now know that this was true. From the well-established Minnesota tradition of visiting the North Woods, to the heritage of outdoor winter recreation, to the unmatched landscape provided by the rugged hills of Lake Superior's North Shore, our vision is poised to become a lasting piece of the fabric of our communities.



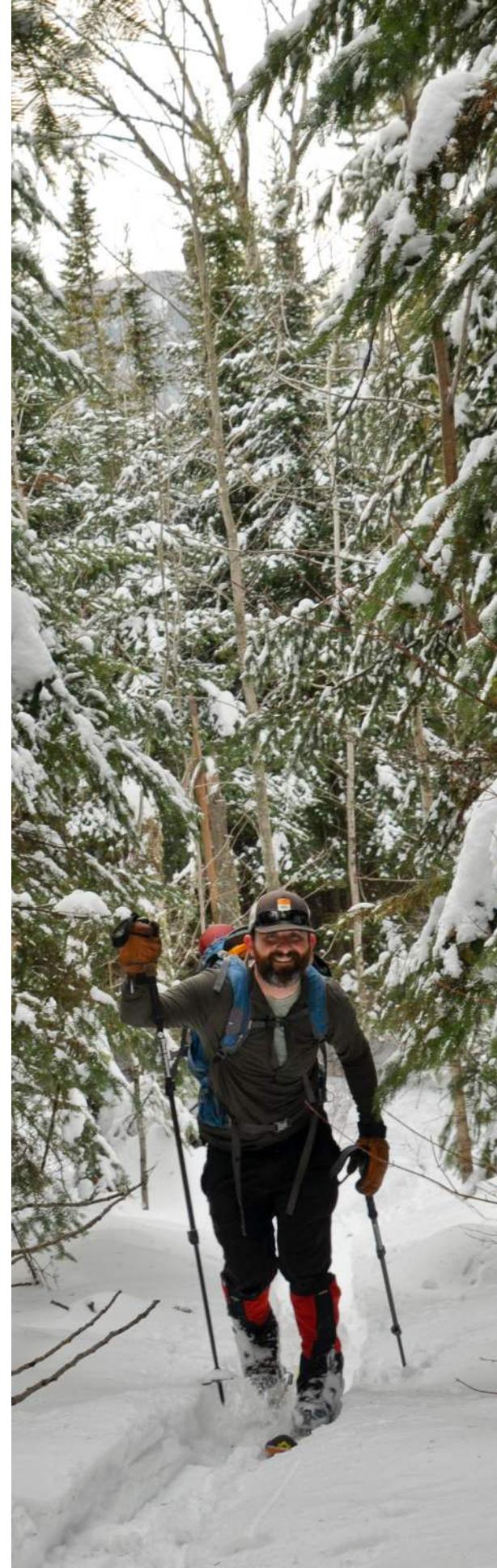
OUR VISION

Picture a handbuilt log cabin at the top of a snowy hill. The woodstove glows, skis lean by the door, and Lake Superior glimmers in the distance. This isn't a postcard; it's the future we're building together.

Our vision is a hut-to-hut trail system stretching from Finland to Lutsen. Anchored by skiable glades and low-impact huts, the system will offer a welcoming, accessible way to explore the North Shore backcountry. Trails will connect each glade, huts will offer overnight shelter, and the entire route will reflect our commitment to conservation, access, and local connection.

"Our vision is rooted in community stewardship, ensuring people can responsibly connect with the land and support rural economies."

—Elli King-Gallager, SHB Board Treasurer



FROM FIRST TRACKS TO REGIONAL MOMENTUM

It started small: one family exploring the untracked wilderness on unusual skis in 2017. That early traction sparked into the flames we thought were there all along: low-impact backcountry access, rooted in local values, was both possible and prime for our communities.

Since then, SHB has grown from a local experiment to a regional movement. We've hosted brush-cutting weekends, created new skiers, and shown the Midwest the gems that they have right in their backyard. By spring of 2024, our membership reached 120 individuals connected not just by shared interest, but by shared purpose.

In 2025, we had volunteers running our newsletter, making our maps, sponsoring our website, seeking out grants and putting on our annual screening of a backcountry film festival in multiple locations. Our Intro to Backcountry instructor brings a personal passion to the class that creates new skiers every time. We have tapped into a vibrant community waiting to happen.

BY THE NUMBERS 2024

- 1 active glade and two in planning stage
- 120 active members
- 4 business sponsorships
- 400+ volunteer hours
- 5 community events held
- 2 community conferences attended
- 1077 unique website visitors in 120 days

SHB FOUNDED

2017

FIRST
VOLUNTEER
BRUSH-CLEARING
WEEKEND

2019

FIRST GLADE
OPENS IN
FINLAND

2020

MOOSE
MOUNTAIN
PRESERVED FOR
PUBLIC USE

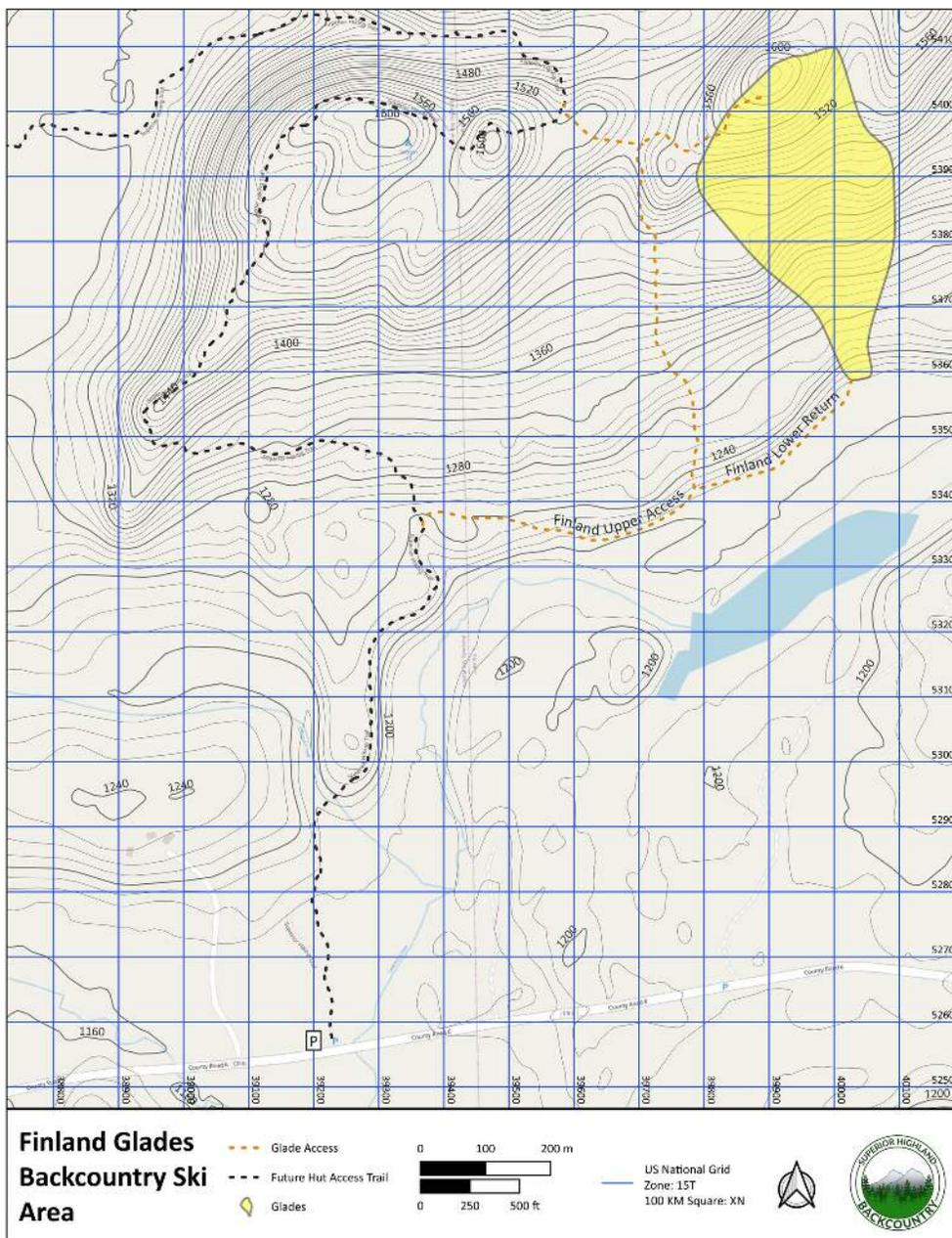
2023

MEMBERSHIP
REACHES
120

2024

FINLAND GLADES, EST. 2020

Located $\frac{3}{4}$ mile north on the Superior Hiking Trail from the large parking lot on County Road 6 (between Finland and Little Marais). Look for the kiosk at the trail junction and follow signs to the Glades.

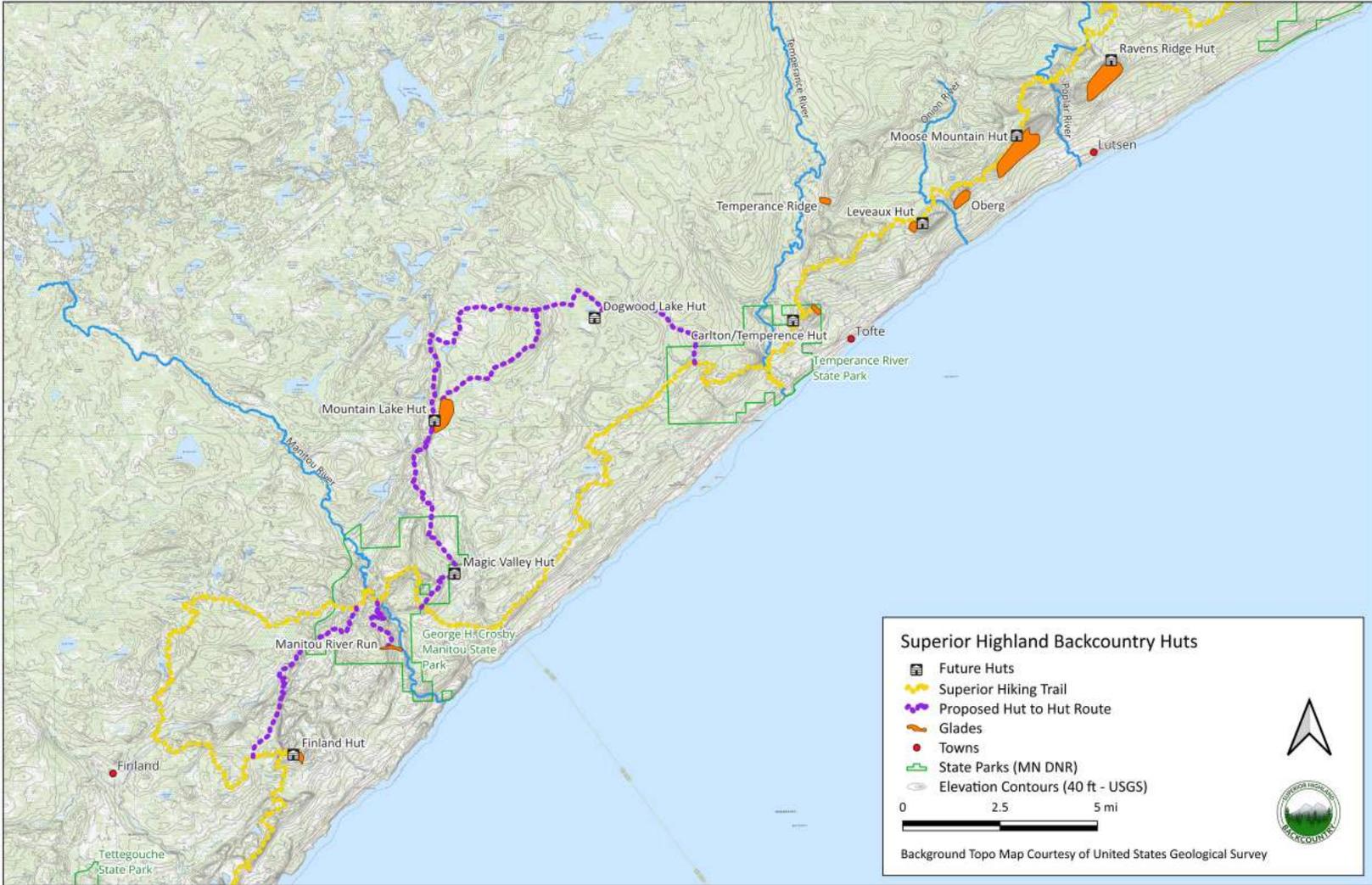


- Average Snowfall: 95"
- Vertical Feet: 423'
- Acreage: 21 acres
- Skiable Days (12" minimum coverage): 90 days
- Intermediate to Expert Level Terrain

A TRAIL NETWORK THAT REFLECTS THE LAND AND THE PEOPLE

The Finland Glades are already open, Moose Glades are in permitting, and Raven’s Ridge is being mapped for the permit process. Next up: networking with landowners and land management agencies to create a hut-to-hut trail system, for multi-day adventures along the route.

Across the country, we’ve explored business models for hut and trail maintenance. Here in Minnesota, we have diverse land ownership and management, which allows us to consider multiple possibilities.



LAND ACCESS MODELS: EVALUATING OPTIONS

We are keeping our skis aimed at our destination of a hut-to-hut system along the Highlands of Lake Superior, and keeping our minds open to trails that will get us there. What we do know is that the passion that backcountry skiers have for our sport manifests in many forms. Below are some of the explorations we have made into the world of possibilities for our very own hut-to-hut system.

Model	Land	Pros	Cons
Public Land Special Use Permit	Public	Longevity, Public Support, Location	Cost of Permit Process
Public Land Management Partnership	Public	Longevity, Land Management Agency Support, Location	Availability/ Willingness of Public Land Agency
Private	Private	Simplicity	Interest of Private Landowner, Location
Land Trust/Private Lease	Private	Location	Interest of Landowner, Access

OUR DIGITAL TRAILHEAD

For many, SHB's [website](#) is the first trailhead they reach. It's where curiosity meets community. It welcomes newcomers, guides returning members, builds our volunteer base, and informs future funders.

In just 120 days during the 2024-2025 ski season, we saw 1077 unique visitors, nearly all of whom arrived through organic search, referrals, or social media. And those visits left behind more than web traffic; they offered insight. We treat what people search, where they click, and how long they stay as a form of dialogue.

We're not just telling our story. We're listening to theirs. This digital engagement shapes our messaging, guides our outreach, and helps ensure our next steps align with the people we aim to serve.



[What We Do](#)

[Who We Are](#)

[The Glades](#)

[Community](#)

[DONATE](#)

[JOIN](#)

[Log In](#)



Superior Highland Backcountry

We see the creation of backcountry ski areas in our region as an excellent way to weave stewardship, human health and enjoyment, and economic vitality together into a single effort. Thru community support we seek to be stewards of the environment thanks to your interest and support from Midwestern skiers.

[MEMBERSHIP](#)

[DONATIONS](#)

Welcome Backcountry Skiers

THANK YOU!

OUR LEADERSHIP: STEWARDS, SKIERS, AND COMMUNITY BUILDERS

SHB is guided by a committed board of directors who bring lived experience, regional knowledge, and a long-term vision for community-powered recreation.

ANN DOLENCE, CHAIR

Having explored backcountry skiing across the nation, Dolence, a long-time Duluth resident, believes that now is the perfect time to expand backcountry skiing along the North Shore.

JOHN WOOD, VICE CHAIR & SECRETARY

Wood, a Duluth-based physician and outdoor enthusiast, joined SHB because of the freedom skiing affords.

ELLI KING-GALLAGER, TREASURER

King-Gallager, a long-time Northern Minnesota resident and skier, is dedicated to expanding backcountry skiing access for all.

RORY SCOLES, FOUNDER & BOARD MEMBER

A backcountry skier and owner of Lutsen Recreation, Scoles founded SHB and lives off-grid in Finland, Minnesota.

JERRY LOPEZ, BOARD MEMBER

A digital consultant and former environmental educator, Lopez began volunteering with SHB in 2019.





OUR PATH FORWARD

To date, SHB has operated entirely on individual donations, modest memberships, and volunteer energy. This grassroots model gave us authenticity and agility, but as our vision expands, so must our infrastructure.

We are actively pursuing grant funding from private foundations, outdoor recreation funds, and rural development sources. These funds will help us hire staff, develop infrastructure, expand access, and deepen our community programming, ensuring our work is sustainable and scalable.

Over the past year, we took time to reflect. Through community input, board retreats, and strategic sessions, we asked hard questions: What's working? What's missing? Where do we go next?

The answer is clear: we have the vision and support but not yet the structure to scale. That's why we've developed a focused strategy to grow with integrity.

STRENGTHS AND OPPORTUNITIES

To ensure this growth remains grounded, strategic, and aligned with our mission, we conducted a formal SWOT analysis assessing our internal strengths and weaknesses, as well as external opportunities and threats.

These findings offer a clear-eyed view of what's working, where we need support, and how we can build a resilient and impactful future together.

SWOT ANALYSIS

A SWOT analysis is a strategic planning tool used to assess an organization's internal strengths and challenges, alongside external opportunities and risks. It helps clarify where organizations stand and what factors could influence their success.

STRENGTHS

- Strong grassroots support and community trust
- Deep local knowledge and regional partnerships
- Clear vision tied to ecological and economic goals
- A successful pilot site (Finland Glade)

WEAKNESSES

- No full-time staff or executive leadership
- Volunteer burnout risk
- Limited brand awareness outside the region
- Undiversified revenue streams

OPPORTUNITIES

- Growing interest in backcountry recreation
- Appetite for sustainable, values-aligned tourism
- Rural revitalization momentum
- Potential partnerships with tourism bureaus

THREATS

- Climate variability impacting snowpack
- Grant competition and permitting delays
- Risk of mission drift without strong infrastructure
- Reliance on volunteer labor



OUR SHARED OPPORTUNITY: FROM INSIGHT TO ACTION

We're at a turning point. The vision is strong. The need is clear. The foundation is solid. But momentum isn't enough. If we want to protect this landscape, welcome new users, and strengthen rural economies, we need to build durable, community-led infrastructure now.

"We are skiers, who will pursue the powder each year as long as our legs will carry us. And we are stewards of our land, for as long as our voices can speak for it." —[Superior Highland Backcountry](#)

WHAT SUCCESS LOOKS LIKE

Our phased implementation plan is ambitious but achievable. Each phase builds on the last, moving us closer to a connected trail system and a resilient organization.

PHASE I

YEARS 1-2: BUILD THE FOUNDATION

- Hire SHB's first Executive Director
- Map and permit Raven's Ridge (Glade #2)
- Launch gear affordability program
- Grow membership by 20%

PHASE II

YEARS 3-4: EXPAND THE SYSTEM

- Open third glade and first hut-to-hut segment
- Build shared infrastructure with partners
- Expand seasonal educational programming

PHASE III

YEAR 5: CONNECT AND EVALUATE

- Open fourth glade and connect huts into a full trail network
- Launch visitor impact evaluation tools
- Use data to strengthen operations and funding

ONGOING COMMITMENTS

Beyond the milestones outlined in our phased plan, SHB will continue to host regular stewardship events and educational workshops, maintain a strong and engaged membership base, and use digital engagement tools to adapt our programs in real time.

These ongoing activities ensure that our work remains grounded in community input, responsive to changing needs, and aligned with our mission of low-impact, community-powered recreation.

MOVING FROM VISION TO IMPACT

Superior Highland Backcountry has proven that local passion and volunteer energy can ignite a movement. But to grow from grassroots traction to a sustainable trail system, we need durable, community-backed infrastructure—and the resources to build it. This is where strategic funding becomes transformational. The table below outlines our most immediate and high-impact needs over the next 1–3 years.

Priority Investment	Purpose	Estimated Cost
Executive Director Hire	Provide year-round leadership, manage grants, partnerships, and programs	\$75,000
Raven's Ridge Permitting & Mapping	Secure and develop our second glade, extending the trail network	\$25,000
Gear Affordability Program	Offer subsidized or free gear for youth, new skiers, and equity access	\$15,000
First Hut Development	Design and build the first low-impact overnight hut along the route	\$90,000
Community Education & Events	Host stewardship days, workshops, and trail orientation events	\$10,000/year
Trail Maintenance Equipment & Storage	Tools, signage, and a secure location for shared gear	\$8,000
Digital Infrastructure & Storytelling	Website upgrades, storytelling campaigns, and CRM tools	\$7,500

EVERY DOLLAR IS A STEP FORWARD

Your support fuels more than trail clearing—it helps build a future where community-led recreation strengthens rural economies, protects the land, and welcomes everyone to explore the backcountry. We invite you to be part of this story.



FUELING THE MOVEMENT

From the start, we have been a heart-and-soul grassroots project. Each of our valued members and volunteers is here with a passion for skiing, the outdoors, community, or all three. Everything we have accomplished to date has been from personal connections, small-scale individual donations, and on-the-ground donations of labor and time.

We believe that outdoor recreation is the best legacy we can create for our communities and our future. Enriching our physical and mental health, valuing our untouched natural landscapes, and sustaining our connection to each other is who we are at SHB. In a region where winter can be a long and lonesome season, we see the creation of backcountry ski infrastructure as a rich contribution to our state's outdoor offerings.

When you join us, YOU become the fuel for our fires and the wax for our skis. YOU will be the reason that we create our next glade and bring a bus full of teenagers to ski it. YOU will see the snow falling outside your window and think about the North Woods, and YOU will hop in the car with your neighbor to go out touring, whether on your sick downhill rippers or your snowshoes, with your old or new friends and family. Whether you prefer to become a basic member or volunteer through our website, talk on the phone, or meet in person to discuss your personal contribution of skills or financial support, we invite you to join us in pursuit of our legacy of hut-to-hut skiing along the North Shore.

BE PART OF WHAT'S NEXT

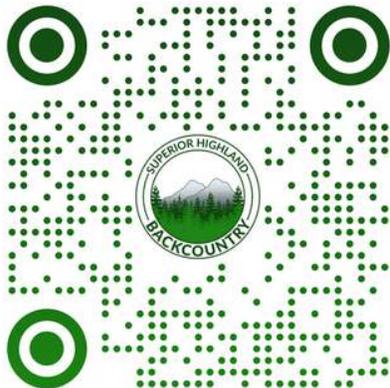
Everything we've built, from glades to governance, has come from community members like you.

Imagine a future where anyone, regardless of experience or income, can explore the backcountry with confidence, care, and community.

Join us today at:

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 superiorhighlandbc@gmail.com



This report was prepared by



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