

Opinion: State Parks' rehearing of Washoe Meadows was a farce

By Nancy Graalman

After a misplaced display of pique – directed at citizens exercising their public meeting rights instead of at California State Parks staff responsible for an awkward do-over of actions taken last fall – State Park

Commissioners approved last Friday a re-packaged resolution that downgrades portions of Washoe Meadows State Park to clear the way for golf course development as part of the Upper Truckee River Restoration and Golf Course Configuration Project in South Lake Tahoe.

The mulligan was prompted by State Parks' seeking to "correct" the procedures that were the foundation of the Commission's vote last October to reclassify Washoe Meadows and approve the river repair project.

It quickly became obvious at the Jan. 27 meeting in Brentwood that the "reconsideration" directive was merely for technical and pre-emptive purposes. The revised reviews, draft resolutions, and findings of fact handed out at the meeting, bolstered by statements by State Parks' legal representation, seemed to be a response to the lawsuit filed in November by the Washoe Meadows Community against the Commission and Parks Department for environmental studies inadequacies as well as violations of statutory obligations related to the reclassification of Washoe Meadows.

It was clear from the start that the the re-vote was a mere formality.

However, because the issue was part of the commission's agenda open for public input, citizens introduced substantive material that adds to mounting evidence that the Parks Department's chosen alternative – which relies on extending nine holes of the Lake Tahoe Golf Course into current Washoe Meadows parkland – remains problematic for issues ranging from geomorphologic claims to economic analyses about golfing trends and the reality of potential burdens on California taxpayers.

Among last Friday's speakers who urged the commission to reject the reconsidered project – or at least delay the vote – was Norma Santiago, El Dorado County supervisor and current chair of the Governing Board of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Ms. Santiago not only cited the significant economic and environmental concerns over the state's proposals, she also offered fresh, creative and positive ways to look at river restoration, golf continuation, and South Lake Tahoe recreational opportunities.

Defense of Place, while firmly denied permission to speak the usual five minutes given to organizations, urged the commission not to leave a legacy as the board that opened the door to the downgrading of legislatively protected state parks, leaving natural resources vulnerable to unintended consequences. (California's only previously publicized attempt to reclassify a protected state park area occurred in September 2010 when the Parks Department yielded to public alarms about legal and ecologic risks and withdrew its proposal to reclassify a portion of Tolowa Dunes StatePark as a state recreation area.)

Nancy Graalman is a member of Defense of Place.