Squaw Valley going through growing pains

By Tom Knudson, Sacramento Bee

OLYMPIC VALLEY — Walled in by majestic snow-clad peaks, Squaw Valley USA has long been known as a mecca for downhill skiing.

Now a proposal by the ski area's new owner to build a year-round luxury resort with condos, cabins, an indoor water park and other amenities is stirring conflict and concern.

"All of us have gotten to know Squaw Valley for its beauty, its ruggedness, its outdoorsy feel," said Judy Carini, a longtime Squaw Valley resident. "What they are bringing is artificial. It's too much of a Disneyland feel."

Ski area officials insist it's just not so. Squaw Valley, they say, must change and grow to remain competitive and can do so without harming the environment or community.

"We are very much of, by and for the mountains," said Squaw Valley President Andy Wirth. "Virtually everything we are considering takes into account the aesthetics and function of the mountains."

There is one thing on which most agree: This time of year, the Tahoe area is skiing. Skiing is the magnet that brings people to the mountains, that fills hotel rooms and rings up sales at restaurants. And with casino gambling in decline, ski areas are more important than ever as an economic engine.

What's driving the debate at Squaw is its push to sell more than lift tickets, to strike new gold with off-season attractions, more ski-area-owned shops and restaurants and a lot more cabins, condos and hotel rooms.

Similar developments have already transformed ski areas across

Colorado and Utah and are the focus of a critical 2007 documentary: “Resorting to Madness: Taking Back our Mountain Communities.”

“As more people seek a niche of their own in high mountain places, these delicate and singular landscapes are being sullied in what amounts to a modern-day gold rush,” the film’s narrator says.

Like a slow-motion wave, that trend arrived late in the Tahoe area, where a luxury ski village, Ritz Carlton hotel and second homes have risen in recent years at and near the Northstar ski area.

That boom set off alarms among environmentalists. Now the Squaw proposal is adding to them.

“What are we saying about the future of the Sierra Nevada if what we choose are high-rise developments and indoor water parks?” said Tom Mooers, executive director of Sierra Watch, a Nevada City nonprofit that has helped protect land around Northstar.

But others believe the Squaw plan is the right fit, none more so than Wirth, whose grandfather directed the National Park Service from 1951 to 1964 and who is a fan of environmentalist legends Aldo Leopold and John Muir.

“Environmental stewardship is something we care very deeply about,” he said. “It’s in the DNA of our staff, my executive team, everything we do here.”

At Squaw, interest began to grow last year after the ski area’s new owner – Colorado-based KSL Capital Partners LLC – unveiled plans to dramatically expand an existing village at the base of the mountain.

Company officials say they want to build more than a thousand lodging units, more retail space, a large indoor aquatic park and other amenities. If approved, the project — which would rise from a sprawling parking lot at the base of the mountain — is expected to take 10 to 15 years to complete.

“There are a lot of reasons to come to Squaw Valley in the wintertime. There are not a lot of reasons to come here in the summertime,” said Chevis Hosea, vice president of development at Squaw Valley.

The plan is part of a suite of other improvements that Wirth said are designed to restore Squaw Valley — home of the 1960 Winter Olympics — to its early splendor.

“This is a resort that largely because of the Olympics was world-renowned,” Wirth said. “It was one of the most desired places in all of North America to go on a mountain vacation.

“In the ’70s, the ’80s, the ’90s, and frankly to a certain extent the past 10 years, the mountain itself was not effectively managed,” he said.

But many who live in nearby homes and cabins now topped with mounds of snow and tinseled with icicles are uneasy about a year-round resort. One big concern is safeguarding the rustic character of the community.

Quaint and isolated, Squaw Valley (which is officially called Olympic Valley) lies about 10 miles south of Truckee just off Highway 89. Bustling in the winter, sleepy over the summer, the place is home to fewer than 1,000 permanent residents, many of whom have known each other for decades.

“It isn’t going to be a community anymore. It’s going to be Disneyland at the end of the valley,” said Ed Heneveld, a physician who has lived in Squaw Valley since the 1970s.

“This developer is dictating our future,” Heneveld said. “It should be the community through the (Placer County) general plan process and forums that makes the case of what we want here, and then they (KSL) accommodate that or not.”

Residents fear the promise of more tax dollars for Placer County, which has its government seat in Auburn on the other side of the Sierra, will drown out their voices. Some are talking about the possibility of incorporation to gain more leverage.

“That’s the only way this community will have a way to dictate its fate and not be at the mercy of KSL,” said Rick Sylvester, a longtime valley resident.

Others welcome the change of pace a year-round resort would likely bring.

“There will be something to do in the spring, summer and fall, which was sorely lacking for decades,” said Fritz Hoffman, who has lived in the valley since 1974. “I’m all for it as long as they do it right and protect the environment.”

An environmental impact report that would vet effects on water, wildlife and other natural resources will be prepared. Some feel possible economic fallout should be scrutinized, too.

“What if they build this and nobody comes?” said Heneveld. “We’re left with the village. Their investors lose some money. They walk away. And I’m still here. My kids are here. My grandkids are here. And we’ve got this empty shell.”

That concern is shaped by the failure of other ski-area-related developments in the region in recent years.

“Don’t look at other failed projects. Look to the track record specific to KSL,” Hosea said, ticking off a list of successful KSL resorts in Hawaii and California.

“The reason this company has not left vacant, blighted buildings is it is a very fiscally disciplined company,” Hosea said.

The fate of the project is uncertain. After a series of meetings with valley residents, KSL has made some changes, including lowering the height of some buildings.

“We are a company that not only respects but aggressively seeks everybody’s opinion,” said Wirth. “We celebrate those opinions.”

More opinions are sure to be aired at a Squaw Valley Property Owners Association meeting set for this Saturday. Jennifer Montgomery, a Placer County supervisor who represents the valley, plans to attend.

“This project has some real possible positive outcomes, both economically and environmentally,” Montgomery said.

But she added: “There are at least as many potential negative outcomes. It probably needs to be pulled in farther than it has been. And they really need to listen to the voice of the community.”