

Opinion: Squaw Valley's plans diminish natural fun

Publisher's note: *Squaw Valley is not in the Lake Tahoe Basin.*

By Tom Mooers

Lake Tahoe is no stranger to wild development schemes.

The latest threat to the Tahoe Sierra centers on Squaw Valley, where developers are proposing a series of high-rise hotels and condos – even an indoor amusement park the likes of which the Sierra has never seen.

In the 1860s, the Lake Tahoe and the San Francisco Water Co. wanted to dig a tunnel from Squaw Valley under the crest of the Sierra and into the Sacramento Valley to drain the lake for the young city's water needs.

A hundred years later, planners and speculators mapped a proposal to encase Lake Tahoe in concrete and subdivisions with double and triple bands of freeways ringing the lake and a causeway across the mouth of Emerald Bay.

At stake now is one of those great Tahoe settings where the natural scenery provides a unique sense of place. Squaw Valley's own iconography is a matter of its meadow and mountains – the flat of the valley quickly giving way to some of the world's most challenging ski terrain.

But developer KSL Capital Partners' proposals promote a very different version of the Squaw Valley experience – based not on the great outdoors but, instead, on indoor amusement.

All told, the proposed development would be 10 times as big – and twice as tall – as the existing village. New development would include as many bedrooms as the four big high-rise casinos at Stateline combined. And it would encourage us to

turn our backs on what makes the Tahoe Sierra so special in the first place.

One indication of the scale of development is the projected construction time: 20 years. In other words, developers propose so much that Squaw Valley would be a construction zone for two decades – raising big questions not only about what we leave behind for future generations, but also how we experience Squaw in our own lifetimes.

At the heart of the proposal lies a dangerous, publicly asserted misconception of the Tahoe Sierra – a false notion that “there is nothing to do here in the summer.” So, instead of opportunities to swim in Lake Tahoe, hike the Pacific Crest Trail or raft down the Truckee, the development would be built around a massive, indoor amusement park – about as big as an average Costco warehouse store – with indoor water slides, a fake “action river” and an arcade. It sounds like fun, but does it sound like Tahoe?

Fortunately for us, Tahoe was not drained in the 19th century, and it wasn’t encased in concrete in the 1960s. Now it’s time for us to appreciate Tahoe for what it is – and not try to remake it into what it is not.

The alternative for Squaw Valley developers is simple: pull their proposal and work together. There are plenty of examples of how conservationists, landowners and developers can cooperate – including last month’s agreement to allow limited development and secure permanent preservation of the neighboring Martis Peak property.

Squaw Valley provides a perfect opportunity to engage local know-how, regional expertise and sound planning to come up with a blueprint that makes sense – a plan that respects the timeless beauty of our Tahoe Sierra and ensures an outcome that, looking back, we can all be proud of.

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