Official: Resorts need to offer more than skiing

By Kathryn Reed

TRUCKEE – If ski resorts don’t become year-round playgrounds, they are going to be out of business. In large part, this is because climate change is bringing less snow to the slopes.

This was the message delivered Nov. 12 by Bob Roberts, president of the California Ski Industry Association. The Truckee-Donner Chamber of Commerce breakfast meeting was filled with industry representatives.

Winters are warming and that means less snow falling in the Sierra. While snowmaking will help save the industry, it won’t be enough. And this is especially true when the drive-up market heads to the slopes when Mother Nature dumps, not when the man-made stuff is blown.

Roberts points to how dramatically things have changed in his lifetime. Five significant glaciers were on Mount Shasta when he worked at that resort. Now, he said, they are slivers.

“We need to stop thinking of them as ski resorts and see them as mountain resorts,” Roberts said. “We’re seeing it here in Tahoe.”

Resorts in Tahoe have been trying to stay ahead of the game as they invest in the on-mountain product. Rope courses, ziplines and other play structures are for the most part year-round activities and not limited to just when there is no snow.

Bob Roberts, president of the California Ski Industry Association, talks Nov. 12 in Truckee. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Roberts pointed out how this summer $100 million was invested in Tahoe area resorts. He noted even a small resort like Sierra-at-Tahoe spent $4.5 million. Then there are the bigger players like KSL (owner of Alpine and Squaw Valley) and Vail Resorts (parent company of Heavenly, Kirkwood and Northstar) that are spending even more. In the last three years KSL will have spent $46 million on its two resorts.

A four-season resort is what ski resorts need to evolve into, Roberts said.

The Tahoe area is responsible for 53 percent of the California skier visits, though 57 percent of the spending occurs here. This equates to $58 million a year in local taxes, Roberts said. Resorts account for 1,700 full-time employees and 7,200 seasonal.

Another concern for ski resorts is fewer people are skiing and snowboarding. Roberts said K2 snowboard sales are down 50 percent. The average number of newbies to skiing-snowboarding across the country has been 1 million. That figure dropped to 850,000 last season.

“We have to get this thing jacked back up. We need to make sure they are hooked and want to continue on,” Roberts said of new skiers and riders.

Between 8.5 million and 10.5 million people from the U.S. ski or snowboard each year. Weather is usually the factor that makes the number fluctuate. The British market is still strong, while the Chinese sector is increasing.

The Asian and family markets are growing in California, while seniors has leveled off.

The demographic that is changing is singles and those younger than 18. They aren’t hitting the slopes. That, Roberts said, is something the industry needs to keep its eye on.