

Recession a boon to conservation groups in Sierra

By Hudson Sangree, Sacramento Bee

The catastrophic collapse in real estate prices that started in 2007 left more than a legacy of mass foreclosures in the Sacramento region; it also left vast expanses of newly preserved open space in the Sierra Nevada that the public can use for recreation.

Depressed land prices allowed private conservation groups to snap up thousands of acres, much of which had once been planned for housing. The properties stretch along the Interstate 80 corridor from the crest of the mountains to the town of Truckee, north to the Feather River and south toward Lake Tahoe. The parcels form a quasi-public park system – one owned by nonprofit groups but accessible to the public, mostly free of charge.

“Increasingly, land protected for the public benefit is owned by private charitable organizations,” said Tom Mooers, executive director of Sierra Watch, a Nevada City-based group that’s played a leading role in recent conservation efforts.

The nonprofits’ holdings include the 3,000-acre Royal Gorge cross-country ski resort. Developers paid \$35 million for the property at the height of the housing bubble in 2005 and planned to build 950 condominiums and single-family houses. Then the market collapsed, making the arduous task of building atop Donner Summit infeasible.

The Bay Area developers who owned the land were ready to unload it, and conservation groups were eager to buy. They agreed to pay \$11.25 million in the summer of 2011, near the bottom of the real estate market.

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