Northstar master plan changes approved

By Jessie Marchesseau

Housing for workers and traffic were two of the main concerns of Placer County planning commissioners on Feb. 2 as they discussed amendments to Northstar's master plan.

The 20-year Northstar Mountain Master Plan includes the following key points:

· 5 new lifts

· A gondola from the lower parking lots

· 25 new ski trails on approximately 175 acres

· 400 acres of new tree skiing

· Widening of existing ski trails

· Additional snowmaking on 13 exiting trails and 12 of the proposed trails

· 3 new lodges/warming huts

· Relocating the cross country center

· Expanding the existing Summit Deck and Grille

· A long-term forest fuels reduction and timber harvest plan

· A habitat management plan including resource protection, seasonal wildlife closures, forest management, invasive weed management and more.

A lengthy presentation explained the above plans and Northstar's desire to make a better experience for resort visitors through expanding terrain and services. There was no mention of the Forest Flyer roller coaster discussed in the past, nor any mention of other summertime services.

Allen Breuch, supervising planner with Placer County, introduced the agenda item and the Northstar representatives in attendance. Breuch gave a recap of the plan, reminding the commission that it came before the planning commission in 2012 and the final EIR has been completed.

Only a very small portion of the improvements would be located within the Tahoe basin, and those would be subject to Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approval.

Northstar representatives noted there will be significant unavoidable impacts. Adding new trails and lifts will have a visual impact from Highway 267. There would also be air quality impacts during construction.

Northstar estimates the expansion will require hiring about 110 new full-time employees who would then need a place to live. Northstar intends to create employee housing to accommodate 75 percent of those employees, though there are no specifics yet on how they would accomplish it.

Commissioners noted that housing is a hot issue right now, in short supply and high demand. They stressed how important it would be for Northstar to carry through on that part of the plan.

The commissioners also expressed concern about parking and traffic issues. On recent weekends, cars trying to enter Northstar have been backed up all the way to Interstate 80. Commissioner Larry Sevison said he was worried this might give a bad name not only to Northstar, but to the Tahoe ski industry as a whole.

The congestion doesn’t hold up just skiers, but locals trying to travel from Truckee to Kings Beach as well, he said.

Northstar representatives skirted the issue without giving any real answer or solution. The master plan was designed to reduce crowding on the ski hill by adding new runs, but does nothing to address the parking problem. The resort will be adding only 20 parking spaces, and those will be at the new cross country ski center location.

Northstar General Manager Nadia Guerriero explained the master plan will “improve guest and employee experiences … with on-mountain, recreational and skier improvements.” She added that it does not include real estate or parking expansion.

With the master plan and EIR already submitted, Northstar was before the commission with a handful of specific items.

The requests brought before the commission were:

· An amendment to relocate an existing tourist/resort commercial land use area.

· Rezone two existing forestry zone areas so one would align with the relocated Martis Valley Community Plan land use designation square, and the other adjusted to a “more suitable location” for development of campsites.

· A zoning text amendment to Placer County Code amending the definition of “ski lift facilities” and “ski runs” and Timberland Production Zone to allow for the development of ski lift facilities and ski runs as a conditionally permitted use within land boundaries owned and/or operated by existing ski resorts within TPZ land located outside the Tahoe basin.

· Approval of a conditional use permit to allow the Northstar Mountain Master Plan which would guide development of the resort over a projected 20-year period.

When the floor opened to public comment, eight people stepped up to offer their opinion. Of those, two expressed concerns about the plan, one about the parking and traffic issue, the other about the soundness of the EIR. The other six commenters were in full support of the plan and the requested changes.

Breuch assured commissioners the EIR was done correctly.

Commissioners approved all requests unanimously.

The commission also approved the extension of a special use permit for the timeshare project at 215 Anderson Road and 6731 North Lake Blvd. in Tahoe Vista. According to representatives on behalf of PFK Development Group, financing issues delayed the project, but the company is ready to move forward with demolishing the existing buildings this summer. Two community members spoke up from the Tahoe City office with complaints about the current condition of the property including trash, severe dilapidation and wild animals. The commission voted to grant the extension with a condition that demolition of existing structures will begin during the 2017 building season.

The Feb. 2 Placer County Planning Commission meeting was in Auburn, though both items on the consent agenda concerned properties located in the Tahoe-Truckee area. Tahoe residents wishing to give input without traveling to Auburn were invited to attend the meeting via interactive video at the Placer County Administrative Offices in Tahoe City.

Opinion: EDC residents should hide their wallets

By Larry Weitzman

The “Day of Reckoning” is coming and it’s not going to be playing at your local movie theater. But it is going to liberate your wallet by far more than a $10 movie ticket.

It has become apparent in a nine-page memo sent to the El Dorado County Board of Supervisors from our honest CAO, Don Ashton. What happened? Just a year ago, our then carpetbagger CAO Larry Combs told the BOS that EDC was in "good financial shape … and structurally balanced." Of course, one of the first things on Combs' agenda was to strip road maintenance from the General Fund budget.


Larry Weitzman

So what does Combs do? He hires his former ACAO at Sutter to be our ACAO and he hires her at the highest salary level, step five or about $182,000 a year. It follows the spoils principle of "hire your friends." Combs even said in the recruitment posting for the new CAO, EDC was in a strong financial position.

But now it appears from the nine-page single spaced Ashton memo to the BOS, things aren't so rosy. Perhaps blood red is a better description as EDC is hemorrhaging and it's going to get worse. The point of this document was money for road maintenance.

On Nov. 7, 2000, EDC voters by a margin of 61 percent to 39 percent passed Measure H. In other words, overwhelmingly voted to allocate at least one half of the "vehicle in-lieu tax" which amounted to at least $3.6 million (one-half of the tax collected in fiscal year 1998-99) to "be expended only upon public roads, way and highways for maintenance, repair, circulation, general road safety and fire access." It was a mandate to the BOS. These funds were part of the General fund at the time.

Unfortunately, about eight years later the state through some tax machinations took away the vehicle in-lieu tax (it was sort of replaced with something else) but it made Measure H ineffective and the BOS was no longer required to spend about $3.5 million of General Fund money annually on road maintenance.

At the most recent budget hearings, there wasn't any General Fund money allocated for the maintenance and repair of our badly decaying 1,080 miles of "centerline" roads. But someone had the bright idea of grabbing $2 million out of the Missouri Flat MC & FP (master circulation and finance plan). Our county counsel said he would get the legal questions solved and the money was put into the 2016-17 budget.

But now according to our new astute CAO, that might be a problem, a very big problem. According to his memo (which is nothing more than an "I told you so" from a previous column), it is possible to get the money, but only if EDC locks away $24,968,000 to pay for the completion of all phase one improvements required under the plan which includes $22.2 million to build the Diamond Springs four-lane parkway.

Of course, the BOS doesn't have $25 million to lock away to free up $2 million. Secondly, it would be beyond stupid to do so. County counsel who told the BOS it could be done was talking out of his hat, never reading the Missouri Flat MC&FP formation documents as I did. And we pay this guy a quarter of a million dollars a year for bad advice and this is only the tip of the iceberg. About the only person who did read it, dozens of typos and all, was former BOS member Jack Sweeney who has said the BOS can't get to the money either.

So where does that leave us? It means a lack of road maintenance, more potholes and an eventual cost to the county of hundreds of millions of dollars. And as above, this is only the tip of the iceberg.

Pension costs are going up significantly, we are going to have the annual $2.3 million expense for 40 years to pay for the new sheriff's facility and we have accumulated millions of dollars in deferred maintenance. But the BOS allocated a new expense of a $150,000 for a public information officer, a spin doctor for when it all hits the fan. BOS will work the mantra "blame someone else." Maybe they should also try the late Flip Wilson excuse, "The devil made me do it."

It's worse. Ashton said in his memo and here it comes, the BOS should consider the feasibility of three new taxes. First, an increase in the transient occupancy tax. Second, an increase in the solid waste franchise fee and third, an increase in the county sales tax. The last two will affect all residents directly, while the former will affect our tourist business, which will have an indirect effect on all residents. I told you to hang on to your wallets.

So, what will the county do? Probably keep paying dues to the California State Association of Counties of about $25,000 to $30,000 a year. Why? Because they are the main lobbying arm for California's 58 counties. And what will they lobby for? New gasoline taxes using the excuse that gas taxes haven't gone up in over 20 years even though California has placed all kinds of new taxes on gasoline like what is effectively an oil severance tax to combat the boogey man "global warming." The idea was with higher gas prices, people will use less of it. California's mileage standards also mean drivers use less gas as well. Another unthought of unintended consequence.

In our state Legislature, the voters have given the Democrats a blank check for new taxes because of super majorities so the counties will get more tax money that way and everyone will blame the state, but the real blame comes from our BOS for not managing the taxpayers’ money. The bottom line, our allegedly conservative Republican BOS is going to hide behind the skirts of CSAC and the liberal super majority democrats of the state Legislature, even spending our taxpayer money to support a liberal democrat cause, raising taxes.

I seem to remember the words “operational efficiencies” at the last budget hearings. The real solution is to cut spending for the lesser and least efficient priorities and deadwood, but not for the number one and two priorities, public safety and road maintenance, excepting the deadwood. Speaking of operational efficiencies, I remember the BOS spending hundreds of thousands of dollars for a survey about a year ago, which not only said the same thing, but the BOS knew that before they spent the money. Perhaps they were hoping for a different result. That reminds me of Einstein’s definition of insanity. But here is one operational efficiency, get a new county counsel. We are spending a lot of money for bad advice.

News flash: At the Jan. 24 BOS meeting, the EDC BOS voted without any discussion, debate or public input to support Senate Bill 1 which will raise gasoline, diesel and vehicle registration fees; $7 billion annually which amounts to $180 a person or about $21 million a year for all of EDC. The average two-car family will see their taxes go up by over $300 a year. Why? Because our BOS cannot make meaningful spending cuts. Any non-government business person could and would cut our general fund budget in a New York heartbeat. I told you so. Didn’t Larry Combs tell the BOS just 15 months ago at the final 2015-16 budget hearings that EDC was in sound financial condition?

Larry Weitzman is a resident of Rescue.

Study: Moving makes you happier

By Gretchen Reynolds, New York Times

When people get up and move, even a little, they tend to be happier than when they are still, according to a study that used cellphone data to track activities and moods. In general, the researchers found, people who move are more content than people who sit.

There already is considerable evidence that physical activity is linked to psychological health. Epidemiological studies have found, for example, that people who exercise or otherwise are active typically are less prone to depression and anxiety than sedentary people.

But many of these studies focused only on negative moods. They often also relied on people recalling how they had felt and how much they had moved or sat in the previous week or month, with little objective data to support these recollections.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Endless benefits to VHRs in SLT

To the community,

My name is Jerry Williams. I am a 36-year local resident, husband, father, grandfather, Realtor and property manager in South Lake Tahoe. I wanted to take a moment to address the prevailing, negative, and detrimental sentiments that currently surround vacation home rentals (VHRs) in our community.

We, who live here, reside among homes that are VHRs, and that has been a reality long before the city officially incorporated some 51 years ago.

In the recent past, vacation home rentals have become the most polarizing issue in our community. My goal in writing this letter is to request and encourage that City Council and staff share with the public the many benefits VHRs provide to this community.

The No. 1 industry in South Lake Tahoe today is tourism. VHRs provide accommodations for visitors. The popularity and demand for VHRs and home sharing is being fueled by consumers looking for a vacation experience they can't get at a hotel.

Revenue

According to the city, VHRs bring in one-third of the total TOT (transient occupancy tax) and TID (Tourist Improvement District) income. In 2015-16, total TOT was reported as $2.5 million to $2.9 million. TID revenue was $470,000 for the same timeframe.

With roughly 1,150 VHRs (outside of tourist corridors), VHR permit fees have generated $500,000-$575,000 in revenue.

Add in application and inspection fees at $545 and $133 and/or $80 per application, that's another $718,750-$779,700 deposited into city coffers for fiscal year 2015-16.

Where does all of this money go? Most of it is funneled into the city's General Fund, which provides for our city's infrastructure – vital services such as:

- Police and fire protection
- Street maintenance … including snow removal!

- Parks and recreation
- General administration

The city multiplier suggests that all of those TOT dollars translate to $20 million (again approximately one-third) going into the local economy, once ancillary businesses are paid (management, maintenance, cleaning, etc); they pay their employees' wages, employees spend money on groceries and gas – and it goes on and on.

Local businesses benefit with more visitors spending money at:

- Restaurants and bars
- Rental companies – boats, Wave Runners, kayaks, paddl boards, skis, boots, poles, bicycles and more
- Retail stores and shops – large and small,
- Grocery stores, supplies, etc.

Employment

There are jobs, jobs, and more jobs – directly and indirectly to VHRs and the visitors they bring:
Direct employment:

- Housekeeping
- Laundry and linen services
- Maintenance and handy people
- Snow removal services
- Reservations
- Office administrative staff
- IT people and marketing specialist
- Licensed contractors
- Plumbing and heating
- Electricians
- Landscapers
- Paving and excavators

Indirect impact on jobs and local employers:

These employees and business owners are directly impacted by the money spent by VHR guests:

- Restaurants and bars – managers, servers, bartenders, dishwashers
- Rental companies – sales people, attendants for boats, Wave Runners, kayaks, paddleboards, skis/boards, boots, poles, bicycles and more
- Retail stores and shops, large and small
- Grocery stores – management, checkers, stockers, customer service.

These local employees then spend money at virtually every business in town; such as hardware stores, auto parts stores, grocery stores, local shops, mini marts, gas stations, bars and restaurants, and that list goes on and on. These local residents – whether they own or rent their home – pay taxes, they have children in our schools, they visit doctors, dentists and emergency clinics, etc. Now we could list all of the people that work in those places.

In February 2016, the council adopted a new Recreation Master Plan. Bravo to the council for something that is much anticipated and will be an absolutely fantastic addition to our community.
In November 2016, Measure P was passed. This was a 2 percent increase in TOT that is to be utilized specifically for this new recreation complex. This is potentially millions each year that will go toward building and maintaining the complex. More jobs and more revenue. And VHRs, contributing one-third of the total TOT, are a huge contributor to this wonderful benefit for residents and visitors alike.

VHRs are not without their own set of concerns and issues, to be sure. I fully support efforts to address problems, increase enforcement, and continue to work toward finding solutions so that the city is empowered and able to effectively resolve our local residents’ issues and concerns. However, concerns seem to be really the only component of VHRs that is ever highlighted or discussed.

In conclusion, this is a request to council, and staff, when VHRs are a topic of discussion – on the agenda, when staff reports are compiled, posted on websites and presented at council meetings – the beneficial, positive, vital, impact and role that VHRs play in our community should be highlighted and emphasized, so that we all get a more balanced view.

Jerry Williams, South Lake Tahoe

North Tahoe, Truckee luxury home sales soared in 2016

By Mark Glover, Sacramento Bee

Luxury home sales in the North Lake Tahoe and Truckee area, which dropped off the table during the recession, shot up 50 percent in 2016, according to the regional office of Coldwell Banker Residential Brokerage.

Coldwell said 280 single-family homes and condominiums priced at $1 million and higher sold last year in the North Lake Tahoe/Truckee market, up from 187 unit sales in 2015. The data was compiled by the Multiple Listing Service.

Read the whole story

Poll: Trump, non-Trump voters agree on public lands

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

If bitter political fighting is tearing your Facebook feed apart at the seams, take heart.

There's at least one issue that does more to unite than divide voters in the western United States; public lands.

Polling from seven western states shows Democrats, Republicans and independent voters have similar interests when it comes to federally managed public land.

The poll, conducted through the Colorado College State of the Rockies project and led by Democratic and Republican consultants, measured the attitudes of voters in Montana, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Nevada, Arizona and New Mexico.

Read the whole story

Report: BLM agent broke rules at Burning Man

By Jenny Kane, Reno Gazette-Journal

A Bureau of Land Management supervisory agent from Utah violated federal ethics rules after he used his position to get his family and girlfriend into Burning Man and influenced the hiring process for a friend, according to a report released Monday.

The Department of Interior’s Office of the Inspector General for a year and a half investigated three complaints about the agent.

The agent is not named in the report but is described as “the person behind many of the BLM requests” at Burning Man that were canceled in 2015, the report said.

Read the whole story

Opinion: Trump may hurt Tahoe real estate market

By Theresa Souers

The California Association of Realtros has issued a statement in response to the announcement by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development that the Federal Housing Administration will indefinitely suspend a recently announced cut in its annual mortgage insurance premium.

“We hope HUD and the Trump administration will make it a priority to quickly review the reduction in the FHA mortgage insurance premium,” said CAR President Geoff McIntosh. “Homebuyers in California, who would have saved an average of $860 per year, will be negatively impacted more than any other state by the decision to not reduce the FHA premium. FHA’s single-family home portfolio is as financially sound as it has ever been, and we hope that once the new administration has thoroughly reviewed the merits of the premium reduction the suspension will immediately be lifted.”

The united belief is that this move by the Trump administration hurts the very people that Trump promised to help during his campaign.

The administration doesn’t plan to stop with the FHA premium cut. According to National Association of Realtors President Bill Brown, the Trump administration is also reconsidering the elimination of mortgage interest and property taxes as federal tax deductions. Also under attack are the current 1031 exchange programs. Such moves send a signal to the public that the government doesn’t support homeownership for the working class, the group that will be most impacted by these moves.

For example, $860 per year, or $72 per month, may not seem like a lot of money over a year’s time. However, South Lake Tahoe’s median home price is $420,000. If you are fortunate enough to be able to save $84,000 (20 percent) for a down payment, and were able to secure a low interest rate, for example 4.25 percent, you would be averaging an estimated monthly payment of $2,200, when including taxes and insurance. If you are lucky enough to have a good paying job in Tahoe, it’s still a stretch to make it work. Now add in the additional $72, plus no deductions from your taxes – homeownership is pushed that much further out of reach for most local residents.

Speaking at the CAR business meetings in Indian Wells last month, Brown reported that homeownership in California is already down to 54 percent. He stated that a thriving middle class of homeowners is needed to support the nation’s economy. In order to achieve improving levels of home ownership, good public housing policies are needed. As NAR’s voice to the working government, Brown promised, “Everything involving home ownership and home ownership rights will be aggressively fought for.”

Theresa Souers is with the South Tahoe Association of Realtors.

TRPA seeks Lake Spirit nominations

Awards recognizing people exhibiting a special dedication to conserving Lake Tahoe are now open for nominations. The 2017 Lake Spirit Awards will honor people committed to a spirit of cooperation and protecting Lake Tahoe.

TRPA created the Lake Spirit Awards in 2011 to recognize individuals showing exceptional commitment to the Tahoe basin. The awards expanded the following year to include categories for exemplary citizen and agency representative/environmental scientist. A winner from the North Shore and South Shore will be selected in each category.

The nomination form for the Lake Spirit Awards may be found **online**. Nominations will be accepted through March 17.

Sandoval set to slash $20M from mental health

By Anjeanette Damon, Reno Gazette-Journal

Gov. Brian Sandoval has proposed slashing the state's chronically underfunded mental health budget by $20 million– including eliminating 112 positions statewide– arguing that the expansion of Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act means more mentally ill clients can find care in private hospitals.

But advocates for the mentally ill say even with Medicaid coverage, patients have difficulty accessing private care in Reno, citing a shortage in psychiatrists in private practice, too-few psychiatrists accepting new patients and a shortage of in-patient treatment beds.

Even more troubling for them is the prospect that Congress has promised to repeal the Affordable Care Act, which means all of the mentally ill clients who now have insurance under Medicaid could lose coverage at the same time the state is shrinking a key safety net.

Read the whole story