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.”

Ski report: Pleasant temps

Temperatures in the 40s and light winds on the slopes.

Here is your Jan. 25 ski report.

— Curtis Fong

Kings Beach gearing up for Snowfest Parade

The Kings Beach Snowfest Parade is coming March 9.

The North Tahoe Business Association hosts this annual fun-filled event that featuring entertaining entries from many local community, nonprofit organizations and businesses.

The parade is from 11:30am-12:30pm. It travels east along Highway 28 between Secline and Chipmunk streets.

Snowfest activities continue throughout the day.

For more information, call (530) 546.9000.

Master plan to set a route for Lake Tahoe Airport

By Joann Eisenbrandt

The South Lake Tahoe City Council on Tuesday made two decisions regarding operations at the Lake Tahoe Airport: the potential outsourcing of airport management and the selection of an outside consultant to prepare an airport master plan.

In October 2012, the city put out request for proposals asking for submissions from airport management companies to manage and operate the Lake Tahoe Airport, with the goals of maximizing the uses and users of the airport, and lowering the airport's operating costs. The airport is currently managed by city staff consisting of Airport Director Sherry Miller and four airport maintenance technicians.

It operates at an approximate annual deficit of $325,000. The idea of outsourcing airport management was suggested by former City Manager Tony O'Rourke in March 2011 as part of the city's five-year plan to reduce personnel costs.

Lake Tahoe Airport's future is tied to the next master plan. Photo/LTN

RFPs were received from two airport management companies, GCR Inc. from New Orleans and ABS Aviation headquartered in Atlanta. ABS manages operations at the Minden-Tahoe airport. The management fees in these proposals ranged from $300,000 to $500,000 annually.

These proposals were evaluated to see if they would create "a reduction in the negative cash flow." In her staff report to the council, City Manager Nancy Kerry indicated that they would not and recommended the council reject both bids. The report noted, "The airport is managed well with a very minimal staff."

Another reason for rejecting outsourcing of airport management at this time is that the city is about to undertake the preparation of a new airport master plan, a long-range planning document dealing with all aspects of airport operations, which Kerry indicated would be assessing a wide range of viable economic alternatives for managing the airport.

“The studies and analysis provided through the master planning process,” the staff report noted, “will provide guidance to conduct a more informed decision on this matter.”

Sherri Thompson, ABS Aviation COO, and airport manager at the Minden-Tahoe Airport noted that ABS wants to stay “engaged” in the process, is involved in the Tahoe community and wants to see the airport succeed. Michael Golden, owner of Mountain West Aviation, the airport’s fixed base operator, spoke, encouraging the council to increase utilization of the airport and set “tangible milestones for staff” such as ensuring that all hangars on the airport are leased out.

The council accepted the staff recommendation and rejected both bids for outsourcing airport management at this time. (Councilwoman Angela Swanson was not at the meeting.)

The council then considered the selection of an outside consultant to produce a new airport master plan. The last airport master plan was completed in 1992 as part of the Lake Tahoe Airport Master Plan Settlement Agreement. This agreement among the city, TRPA, California Attorney General’s Office and League to Save Lake Tahoe ended years of contentious disagreements and resultant lawsuits regarding appropriate noise restrictions, commercial flight levels and other operational issues at the airport. It put in place a complex set of requirements and restrictions regarding commercial service.

During the last 20 years, a cavalcade of commercial air carriers served the Lake Tahoe Airport under the terms of the settlement agreement, but none of them lasted. There has been no scheduled commercial service at the airport for more than a decade.

The city has continued to maintain the economic importance of the airport to the community, and has retained its FAA-issued Part 139 Air Operating Certificate, required of airports with scheduled commercial service.

There has been considerable discussion, with varying viewpoints, of what are the guidelines for commercial service now that the settlement agreement has expired. There are no simple answers. Some parts of the 1992 master plan and accompanying environmental impact report carry over. Which ones they are depends on who you ask. As City Manager Nancy Kerry noted at the council meeting, “We still operate under that umbrella,” but did not go into any specifics.

TRPA External Affairs Chief Julie Regan told *Lake Tahoe News* in June 2012 that, “If the current (master) plan expires before a new plan is in place, the status quo would continue, i.e., the city would continue to operate the airport as a general aviation facility until a new plan is developed and put in place.”

General aviation airports do not have scheduled commercial service.

Kerry indicated that an airport committee, comprised of herself, Miller and councilmembers Tom Davis and Swanson has been reviewing these issues over the last year, and determined that the city’s best course was to complete a new, comprehensive master plan now.

Under FAA guidelines, the city had to first put out a request for qualifications to be sure a qualified consultant was selected before any agreement regarding the costs of the master planning process could be entered into. An RFQ was put out by the city in August, and three responses were received: from Mead and Hunt Inc., C&S Companies and Vanir in Association with RBF Consulting. Staff recommended the city select Mead & Hunt, and enter into negotiations with them to prepare the airport master plan. This recommendation was based on the criteria that the firm had the necessary technical expertise, their staff had familiarity with this specific airport, local regulations and environmental issues, had experience preparing master plans at similar airports as well as past success in actively engaging local communities in the master planning process.

Once the consultant is selected, then the city, the consultant and the FAA enter into negotiations. The FAA will pay 90 percent of the costs, up to $318,000. The city must pay the remaining 10 percent. The city has already allocated its share in the 2012-13 budget. These amounts do not include preparation of the environmental documentation, which is estimated to be about $250,000. The city will conduct a cost benefit analysis to determine whether it is best to hire a consultant for this phase or hire one or two short-term in-house environmental planners.

The council accepted the staff recommendation and directed that the city enter into negotiations with Mead & Hunt. A formal agreement will come back to the council for approval at a later date.

Master plans historically can take up to two years to complete. Kerry noted that the city is hoping in this case to have an “expedited” master planning process.

The city has been actively seeking proposals from regional air carriers flying new generation, quieter aircraft to begin serving the Lake Tahoe Airport. Mayor Tom Davis added, “We might have an airline interested within a year or year and a half.”

If the new master plan were not completed at that point, then the city and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency officials would have to sit down and decide on what noise, flight levels and other requirements had to be satisfied in order for the city to get a TRPA permit. Kerry said the city would need to complete environmental documentation if they changed the "current use" of the airport by adding scheduled commercial service. She added that she believes TRPA would respond positively to a proposal from an airline with three to five flights a day using quieter aircraft that met the decibel levels established under the 1992 Settlement Agreement.

Workshop for businesses about California laws

North Lake Tahoe Chamber/CVB/Resort Association and the Truckee Donner Chamber of Commerce in partnership with the Sierra Human Resources Association are offering Legal Update for California Business Leaders and Managers on Feb. 8 from 9am-noon.

The event is at Cedar House Sport Hotel, 10918 Brockway Road, Truckee.

Attendees will learn about new laws that take effect in 2013 and how they impact employers; California legislative update and California law updates; important U.S. Supreme Court and California rulings; significant agency regulations, opinions and trends to watch in 2013; and best practices and practical advice to prepare your organization for employment law compliance in the new year and beyond.

The workshop will be led by Mary L. Guilfoyle and Walter Stella of the Miller Law Group in San Francisco.

Registration is $55/person for chamber and SHRA members and $65/person for non-members. Walk-in registration is $60/person for chamber and SHRA members and $70/person for non-members.

To register and for more information about the workshop, call Laura Moriarty at (530) 573.0224.

Editorial: Brown's budget not kind to court system

Publisher's note: ***This editorial is from the Jan. 16, 2013, Los Angeles Times.***

Not long before the economy collapsed in 2008, California's courts raised many fees and fines to pay for a far-reaching program of courthouse construction. The plan was not for new judicial palaces or unnecessary luxury, but for replacing buildings that were designed with a 1950s population in mind and constructed with equally outdated techniques that now jeopardize the safety of jurors, litigants and everyone else who uses them. The state's budget distress put most of the program on hold as money from those higher fines and fees, which were imposed on a public also feeling the financial hard times, was diverted to pay for basic operations after court funding was slashed.

The diversion was necessary. All state operations had to be deeply cut during the crisis, including the courts. But now that voter-approved temporary tax increases and a gradually improving economy and housing market have slowed the cuts, the courts must be given at least a little room to breathe.

Gov. Jerry Brown’s proposed budget provides some good news: The governor backed off plans to confiscate the minimal reserve funds that trial courts had saved to ensure that they remained solvent even amid continuing fiscal emergencies. Still, his budget does take an additional $200 million from the court system, which will force it to close courthouses, cut services, increase more fees and continue to delay courthouse construction. In Los Angeles County, that would mean further retrenchment from a modern court system that serves its people and a return to an outdated system with impossibly long freeway treks to, for example, obtain domestic violence restraining orders or even to appear before a judge in a small claims or landlord-tenant dispute. It would mean that instead of safe, user-oriented facilities located near today’s population centers, the public — already paying higher fines and fees for updated buildings — must continue to struggle with postwar-era courthouses offering reduced service hours and diminished assistance.

Of course, every program that was cut over the last five years is getting in line to have its funding restored. Or rather, they’re jockeying for position at the front of the line. But Proposition 30, the tax hikes that voters approved in November, doesn’t provide funding for restoring previous cuts. California’s new supposed good budget times simply mean that for most programs there won’t be additional cuts. But for courts, the slashing continues.

Courts are not just another program. They are a coequal branch of government, quite obviously essential to the delivery of justice, but essential as well to a developing economy and a civil society that can resolve disputes fairly and efficiently. The Legislature should keep that in mind as it makes adjustments to Brown’s proposed budget.

Kaepernick’s tattoo artist doing brisk business

By MSN

The 49ers’ win against the Falcons Sunday was good news for more than San Francisco and its fans. It also likely meant a spike in business for Colin Kaepernick’s tattoo artist.

Kaepernick’s prodigious ink has garnered a lot of attention already. In a widely criticized article on AOL in November, David Whitley pointed out that about “98.7 percent” of prison inmates in California have tattoos. He then wrote “I’m … pretty sure less than 1.3 percent of NFL quarterbacks have tattoos. There’s a reason for that.” (AOL said in the article that the writer’s opinion was not reflective of the company.)

The 49ers quarterback is covered in tattoos, including Bible verses on his arms. His longtime tattoo artist, Nes Andrion, told TMZ his tattooing business has profited from the success of the young quarterback.

“People want to get their tattoos done by the same artist as Colin Kaepernick,” Andrion said to TMZ.

Andrion said he has been Kaepernick’s tattoo artist for years. He told TMZ he started inking the athlete back when Kaepernick played football for the University of Nevada Wolf Pack in Reno, where the tattoo shop is located.

But it wasn’t until Kaepernick stepped up in November to replace quarterback Alex Smith, who’d suffered a concussion, that Andrion saw a spike in business.

“People come in and ask if I am the artist that does Colin’s tattoos, and ask when I think I am going to tattoo him again,” Andrion told TMZ.

Andrion said Kaepernick plans to return to the shop during the off season to finish the tattoo spanning his chest, according to TMZ.

Squaw, Alpine to host The North Face Masters of Snowboarding event

The North Face Masters of Snowboarding presented by PrimaLoft will take place Feb. 13-17 at Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows.

The event will feature top big mountain snowboard competitors battling for The North Face Masters of Snowboarding champion title, $15,000 in prize money and a chance to advance to the 2014 SWATCH Freeride World Tour by The North Face.

The event will feature one open two-star Freeride World Qualifier event at Alpine Meadows (Feb. 13-14) with the top five men and top three females advancing to the Masters four-star Championship event.

The Masters Championship event will take place over two days at Squaw Valley immediately following the qualifier event at Alpine Meadows.

Avalanche survivor, big mountain climber to give talk on N. Shore

Alpenglow Sports hosts Roger Strong on Feb.7 at Olympic Valley Lodge as the fourth installment of the 2012-13 Winter Film Series.

Strong grew up skiing and climbing in Colorado, then moved to Seattle after high school to be closer to his 20-year career as a crab fisherman in the Bering Sea.

“One of my father’s rugby buddies introduced me to climbing in my early teens,” explained Strong, “but I didn’t dive in to it heavily until after my first year of commercial fishing out of high school … thankfully that enabled me to afford all the gear!”

Strong’s slideshow will detail his recent alpine/big wall climbing in Alaska, Canada and Washington as well as ski touring/mountaineering in the Cascades. Strong will also share the story of the avalanche at Snoqualmie Pass that broke both his legs, and how it changed his perspective on consideration of conditions and lines, but reaffirmed his lifelong love of the mountains.

The Alpenglow Winter Film Series is free and is designed to motivate, inspire, and educate. The show begins at 7pm.

Call Alpenglow Sports at (530) 583.6917 with questions.

Ex-El Dorado County man pleads guilty in wire fraud case

Daniel Chartraw, 39, formerly of El Dorado County, pleaded guilty today to wire fraud in connection with a multimillion dollar investment fraud scheme.

According to court documents, between Jan. 1, 2007, and Nov. 30, 2011, Chartraw defrauded numerous investors by falsely representing investments in mines, mining and refinery equipment, oil commodities, precious metals concentrate, and multimillion dollar certificates of deposit.

According to the plea agreement, Chartraw stole $1 million by fraudulently posing as an owner and manager of a company selling “dore” bars, which Chartraw claimed contained precious metals. Chartraw arranged for an investor to tour the company and managed to limit the investor’s interaction with the company’s true owners and prevent discovery of the scheme. When the investor placed $1 million into an escrow account for the purchase of the dore bars, Chartraw used a forged letter to get the escrow company to send the money to accounts that he and others controlled.

It’s estimates investors lost more than $3.5 million.

Chartraw’s 2011 Escalade was seized by the government and sold for $50,500. The proceeds will go to the defrauded investors.

Chartraw is scheduled to be sentenced on May 2. He faces a maximum sentence of 20 years in prison, to be followed by three years of supervised release, and a $250,000 fine. As part of his plea agreement, Chartraw will also be ordered to pay restitution to his victims.