First National Geothermal Academy to be at UNR in summer

By Reno Gazette-Journal

The National Geothermal Academy hads inaugural summer session at UNR this year. It is the first of its kind in the United States.

Forty students from around the country will have an intensive eight-week geothermal energy education program. The goal of the academy is to educate and train the next generation of scientists, engineers, plant operators and policy makers.

It is a consortium of top geothermal schools from around the country including Cornell University, Stanford University, Southern Methodist University, West Virginia University, the Oregon Institute of Technology, the University of Utah and Dartmouth.

The Department of Energy awarded UNR a $995,000 grant to develop and operate the academy. The university has 20 years of geothermal research, development and exploration success.

Read the whole story

Nevada bikeway route gets

environmental green light

By Susan Wood



Rabe Meadow between Stateline and Round Hill may be a future site for the first phase of a proposed bike link. Photo/Susan Wood

INCLINE VILLAGE – A critical step in the Nevada Stateline-to-Stateline bikeway project was accepted Friday by the Tahoe Transportation District, an arm of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency tasked with such issues.

The public comment period ended for the environmental assessment. Now, the U.S. Forest Service and TRPA need to approve it.

Groundbreaking of the first phase of the $9 million project is scheduled for May 15. Officials have about half that amount with funding sources being lined up, TTD Executive Director Carl Hasty told *Lake Tahoe News*.

The first of three phases covers two miles from Stateline to

Elks Point Drive. The 30-mile trail advances on paper to Crystal Bay. Each phase is estimated to cost about $2.5 million.

Project managers and officials are reviewing different options. One choice crosses Rabe Meadow and merges with the Watah Trail that starts at Kahle Drive in Stateline and meanders through Round Hill. The other parallels Highway 50.

Project Manager Alfred Knotts told the transportation board the “superior” alternative staff is leaning toward is the latter because of fewer environmental concerns.

The proposal calls for bike racks, signs, picnic tables and restrooms.

“I’ve very excited with the progress. It’s an important link,” said TRPA Senior Transportation Planner Karen Fink, a longtime cycling advocate.

Cycling venues are believed to contribute $23 million in tourism revenue and reduce carbon dioxide emissions by 1,400 metric tons.

In other items, the transportation district:

-Approved the request for proposal to be used to secure a long-term operator for BlueGo Transit Services, which has been mired in legal wrangling and complaints. The district, which will oversee the service, wants a reliable operator on a long-term contract.

Ski report: Changing conditions



Blue skies this morning could quickly change – layer up and be prepared for anything. Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Ski report: Winter is back



A winter weather advisory remains in effect until 11am. Expect wind and snow showers throughout the morning, with thunderstorms possible this afternoon. Be safe out there, and call ahead for conditions on the slopes. Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

New South Shore recreation measure slides into first

base

By Susan Wood

It may have the makings of a great novel – perceived sexism, money and the law.



Ballfields like the one on Rufus Allen Boulevard could be headed toward improvements if a new measure goes before voters in November. Photo/Susan Wood

A proposed measure to go before El Dorado County voters in November to fund recreation improvements for ball fields and bike trails as an altered version of Measure S passed its first hurdle with the city. And already, recreation alliances and competing forces have formed to vie for the coveted $470,000 collected since the first recreation-oriented initiative passed.

Essentially, the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Facilities Joint Powers Authority and recreation advocates would like to change

the controversial Measure S that's been in effect for more than a decade. In 2009, advocates of ball field improvements tried to channel that money away from bicycle trails, but Measure B failed with only 62 percent of the vote. The ballot initiative needed a two-thirds vote.

Former City Councilman John Upton, the one staff person managing the finances of the JPA, got the approval from the city Tuesday to proceed to the next base but not before entering into an almost two-hour discussion on the preliminary ballot language.

The new language highlighting "Little League" fields came into question when a softball mom challenged the baseball-myopic group pushing the new measure to include the predominantly girls leagues.

And she had listeners in high places – namely City Councilwoman Angela Swanson, who had to remind the male dominated group speaking to the matter that girls have taken a second seat in sports for too many years pre- and post Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The federal law dictates the support of facilities for women's sports on an equal playing field with the men.

"By law, you have to bring the girls facilities up to the men," Marilyn Breisacher said. The softball mom watched her daughter grow up wondering why "her brother got to play on better fields." She doesn't want that to happen anymore.

On several occasions, she cited AB2404. enacted in 2005 and mandated for local governments five years later, making California the first state in the nation to enforce the civil rights of girls in community athletics as an institution in local jurisdictions and special districts.

Breisacher also took issue with the language singling out the field on Rufus Allen Boulevard at the former Al Tahoe Middle School where the Little League teams play as the one place

getting the money for improvements such as batting cages, irrigation systems and a snack bar. She wants to see the improvements expanded to the South Tahoe Middle School field. Right now, Tahoe Valley Elementary is where the softball teams play.

When all was said and done, Upton pledged to broaden the language to read “baseball/softball” fields and deleted the specific reference to improvements at one particular ball field. Councilman Tom Davis repeatedly asked if the changes would meet the state bill requirements. To that, Breisacher nodded.

The $6.5 million Measure S has turned out to be a hot-button issue in some circles because it was written in vague language to cover “ball fields.” Even the specifics haven’t always followed the letter of the law. The multipurpose field built next to Lake Tahoe Community College opened with much fanfare, but three were supposed to be constructed, and both baseball and soccer teams compete for playing time there. Softball leagues get bumped.

The intent of the new measure is to take the $470,000 currently on the books and split it between ball field improvements and bicycle trail maintenance to routes built before Measure S passed. This current law now only allows the money to be spent on trails constructed after the measure passed. That’s not many trails. Only eight of the anticipated 25 miles have been laid. The shortage created a cash-cow fund building at $5,000 per year, per mile that the JPA collects from taxpayers on about 50,000 parcels to the tune of $18 per year. The Measure lasts until 2030.

“I hate to see that money languish like this,” Mayor Hal Cole said Tuesday.

Cycling advocates would like other trails to get much-needed maintenance in this pothole infested region.

Longtime cycling advocate Tom Wendell supports changing the law under this new proposed measure “in theory” because the effort appears more inclusive and covers more trails because many were built long before 2000. He couldn’t say this about Measure S or even Measure B. He also takes issue with the money collected being called “excess” funds when they were clearly designed to go toward the maintenance of the area’s dilapidated, broken trail system.

“We are in dire need. Those trails are bad,” Wendell said Wednesday.

“We have fallen short in terms of meeting our obligations. We have to address in the end that the bike trails are getting a great deal of that money. There’s no way on God’s green Earth we are going to take that money for upkeep of the trails and give it (all) to the ball field people,” said El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who also serves on the JPA board consisting of the city, county and Tahoe Paradise Resort Improvement District run out of the park in Meyers.

Santiago has a history with Measure S. She ordered the complete audit of the funds in 2006, when it became clear the infrastructure it was designed to protect was in disrepair and a lot of money was being collected.

The county is expected to hear the proposal for the new measure in the next few weeks.

Then by May 5, the JPA will meet and determine whether it wants to cough up $35,000 to support an election effort. The ballot measure’s language must be finalized by the end of June to make the November ballot.

Ski report: Snow on the way



A winter weather advisory is in effect from 11pm tonight through Thursday morning – more powder on the slopes! Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Ski report: Calm before the storm



Wind and snow are once again headed our way – get out while you can, and call ahead for lift information. Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Varsity baseball goes big time

The South Tahoe High Varsity Baseball Team plays Truckee High’s Wednesday at the Aces Ballpark in Reno, KTHO reported Monday. The game time, which starts at 4pm, will be broadcast live from the press box by KTHO.

Aces officials are also allowing the radio station to conduct the public service announcements for the game.

Ski report: Blue skies



It’s shaping up to be another warm, sunny day to get out on the slopes. Here is the ski report from Curtis Fong, the Guy from Tahoe.

Northstar striving to be California’s premier ski resort

By Susan Wood

TRUCKEE – Could Northstar-at-Tahoe be the next Beaver Creek? Or a Deer Valley?

Those are the questions Vail Resorts is posing as it plans to invest $30 million in capital improvements into the Truckee-area resort for the 2011-12 ski season. Upgrades include a mid-mountain lodge at the top of the Tahoe Zephyr Express chair, more snowmaking off the Drifter run and another lift off the backside that services two new runs.

Once considered a modest family resort years ago, “Northstar has come a long way” in the last few years, Chief Operating Officer Bill Rock told *Lake Tahoe News* on a recent media ski day. “That’s what attracted Vail.”



Adding a lift next season will allow access to more of Northstar's backside. Photos/Kathryn Reed

Vail bought Northstar a few months ago from Booth Creek partners, who maintain ownership of Sierra-at-Tahoe on the South Shore. The acquisition comes on the heels of consistent minor- to-moderate upgrades and a major one that includes the building of the first five-star hotel in the Lake Tahoe region – the Ritz-Carlton situated off the Highlands Gondola.

Rock admitted the improvements were already on the drawing board but would have been finished years in the future. Now, the plans have been fast-forwarded with bringing a ski conglomerate like Vail to the North Shore. The Colorado-based company expects to sink at least $83 million in improvements in all its resorts for next ski season.

“That’s what Vail brings to the table,” Rock said.

Vail also owns Heavenly Mountain Resort on the South Shore, along with Vail, Breckenridge, Keystone and Beaver Creek in

Colorado. These resorts are considered to be some of most upscale by most U.S. standards. At some, tissue is handed out at the lodges, along with warm chocolate chip cookies and gourmet hot chocolate at the base and summit.

“We’re not interested in being a cookie-cutter resort,” Rock said, noting how travelers are seeking “the California experience” when they arrive. He hinted a chef with the reputation of the Ritz-Carlton’s Traci Des Jardins would be running the menu at the new lodge. It’s still unclear who will own the lodge at this point because Vail holds a 40-year lease to operations of the resort, while CNL Lifestyle Properties owns the land.

The aim is to relieve congestion at the top of the popular Big Springs Express Gondola, where hundreds gather at the day lodge or in front of three mid-mountain, high-speed lifts – Vista, Arrow and Tahoe Zephyr.

“From here (at the top of Tahoe Zephyr), you could ski the backside without ever returning (to the base),” Rock said.

While this “California” experience calls for amenities that go way beyond skiing the snow surface, it doesn’t mean Vail isn’t seeking uniformity in some of its properties. The signs of the new 500-seat, on-mountain restaurant show images that look precisely like Heavenly’s Tamarack Lodge, which was completed in February between its Tamarack chairlift and gondola.

Northstar’s is expected to break ground in June and will serve gourmet pizza, specialty soups and sandwiches, with a large salad bar.

Although the lodge cannot be seen off the mountain, the 200-foot deck will jut out from the ridge for a view that still excites veteran planner Tim Beck, who’s worked for Booth Creek for 13 years before becoming the chief planner for Vail Resorts.

With all the changes, Beck views Northstar as a ski resort that splits its appeal and attention between the day skier coming up from the Bay Area feeder market and the destination skier who stays longer and spends more. The latter visitor expects more in venues as Beaver Creek has shown.

“We think this is a special spot,” Beck told the media group at the site. A sign marks the spot. Northstar has already started tree thinning. About 60 will need to be removed, and still more thinned.

“I’d like them to focus more on the mountain,” said Carson City resident Mike Johnson, who has skied around the lake at the various resorts for years. Northstar answered his call for more terrain opportunity with the other part of the improvements – a lift and two runs.

The project makes way for a detachable quad that runs through a wooded area overlooking the Martis Valley and Sawtooth range. One new run will be more traditional, while the other is tree lined. The runs will provide tree islands that add to the fun – much like its black diamond clad Martis run.

Placer County, Lahontan Regional Water Control Board and the California Department of Fish & Game oversee the resort. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has no jurisdiction on Northstar’s plans. But with the extent of them, Beck and company enlisted the early support of Sierra Watch and other environmental groups, which have a watchful eye on Martis Valley development. The Sierra Watch website has called the collaboration “another great example of our strategic foresight.” No authority for the group agreed to comment.

Northstar is in the process of creating the environmental-related documents.

Plans for the village include the opening of retail outlets Patagonia and Burton as well as an expansion for the North Face store.

Northstar-at-Tahoe is located off Highway 267 between Kings Beach and Truckee.

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