

Tahoe economy dependent on skiers

By Kathryn Reed

For the person schussing down one of the myriad slopes in and around Lake Tahoe, it's all about fun.

For the people running the resort, it's a business. Skiing impacts a variety of industries — lodging, restaurants, massage, retail and others. If the resorts don't do well, no one does well.



With the Ritz-Carlton opening Dec. 9 at Northstar, it may bring an infusion of cash to the North Shore. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The California Ski Area Association says the 4.2 million skier visits each year in Lake Tahoe make it a \$600 million industry. The organization says a skier visit equates to \$150 per day being spent at Tahoe businesses.

The past couple of ski seasons have been less than stellar,

though.

It's hard to know if the ski resorts have hurt themselves by starting the season so early – Mammoth and Boreal opened in October, albeit not every day. Before snowmaking became what it is, the Lake Tahoe area was lucky to have good snow at Christmas.

Now skiers expect to be on their boards at Thanksgiving. If they aren't, the Bay Area media write and broadcast stories about the lackluster snowfall and predictions for a bad ski season. It's silly, false, wrong and just bad journalism.

Those media types also have a penchant for playing up big storms that turn out to be mini-events – but it keeps people from making the trek to Tahoe. For locals, it makes for a fabulous, uncrowded powder day.

The reality, though, is California and Nevada departments of transportation know how to clear highways of snow. And forecasts miss the mark more often than they hit a bull's eye.

It is true that fingers are crossed, snow dances are under way and all eyes are on Mother Nature. After all, it doesn't matter what new lift, event, five-star hotel or menu item a resort comes up with, if the snow isn't good and plentiful, the skiers stay home.

They did that in 2008-09. The National Ski Areas Association said in Tahoe the number of skier visits was down 10 percent last year compared to 2007-08. In part this was because of the spastic snowfall, part because of the economy.

One positive about the recession may be those on the West Coast who want to ride will do so closer to home instead of flying to Colorado or Utah.

Pundits in the ski industry are cautiously optimistic the

2009-10 season will be better than last year. It's possible with the Olympics at Whistler in February it may generate enthusiasm for winter sports. It might also drive people to Tahoe instead of Canada because they don't want to deal with the chaos.

It was 1960 that the Winter Olympics were last on the West Coast of North America " when Squaw Valley welcomed the world, and in turn put Tahoe on the map.

Squaw is capitalizing on the 50-year anniversary with a slew of events. Olympic Heritage Celebration is Jan. 8-17. For details, go to www.SquawValley1960Celebration.com.

Squaw is one of many resorts looking to attract more skiers and boarders. The North Shore resort once sold season passes for as much as \$1,900; now they are as low as \$369.

Across the lake at Heavenly Mountain Resort the current season pass is \$369, but it had been \$329 " what it was a few years ago.

One of the best deals continues to be the Learn to Ski or Board program on the North Shore for \$25 on Dec. 12-13. Details are at www.gotahoenorth.com.

Sierra-at-Tahoe (www.sierraattahoe.com) is selling three-packs of lift tickets for \$45 per ticket through the end of the year.

Northstar is banking on the Dec. 9 opening of the Ritz-Carlton at the top of the gondola to make it the resort of choice.

For those who don't have a season pass, check out REI, Costco, Snowbomb.com, and DiscountLiftTickets.net for deals on daily tickets. Once in Tahoe, sometimes deals can be found, too " but most are found off the hill.

Be sure to read *Lake Tahoe News* all week to find out what is going on with nine of the Lake Tahoe area ski resorts for the

2009-10 ski season.