

Kirkwood solves short-term power issue, working on final

By Kathryn Reed

Electrical power at Kirkwood is a highly charged subject – and not an issue easily followed without an organizational chart.

This week PowerSecure, a company based in North Carolina that is the largest independent supplier of power in Northern California, was awarded the bid to supply power for the Kirkwood Valley on an interim basis. Their Cummins diesel generators should be working in October.

“They will bring in their own equipment and operators. We have gone to an outsourcing solution that will significantly improve reliability (of power),” David Likins, CEO of Mountainsprings Kirkwood, told *Lake Tahoe News*.



Construction of Kirkwood's powerhouse should be done by Nov. 1.
Photo/Provided

Kirkwood's electrical issues have been a source of debate for people who live in the valley because the resort, other commercial entities and residential units are off the grid. Complaints of high prices, outages and poor environmental

practices have been the mantra for years.

The problem was exacerbated when a New Year's Day fire destroyed the electrical plant.

Caterpillar diesel engines were brought in to keep the lights on and lifts turning.

In the eight-plus months since the fire a series of events related to the power issue have taken place and more significant dates are on the calendar.

Kirkwood Meadows Public Utility District is having a special meeting Sept. 24 at 3pm in Kirkwood. The public hearing will address issues of connecting to the grid, and costs ratepayers may incur from that as well as the current construction of the replacement powerhouse.

Long term, Kirkwood would like to tie into the grid via going through National Forest and connecting with Pacific Gas & Electric lines. The draft environmental impact statement is under agency review. It should be out for public comment later this year. It's possible the final EIS could be approved in spring 2011, with construction to tap into the grid beginning next summer.

"They have identified a route in an already disturbed area," Likins said.

But the need for a powerhouse in Kirkwood remains even if the area that touches on El Dorado, Alpine and Amador counties taps into the grid.

The grid connection will be a single point instead of a loop, meaning when a line is down or something else happens to the power supply, Kirkwood will be in the dark. A backup will be needed to keep the lights on.

That is why plans are going forward to replace the powerhouse. That building is under construction now. The building and

underground distribution system will be replaced this fall.

“We lost about 60 percent of our circuits in the fire. We could Band-Aid through those issues last winter. It was a very fragile system,” Likins said. “Instead of a bowl of spaghetti, we had a strand,” he said of the wiring.

During the winter and spring months all of the connections will be made and the exhaust system put into place. The goal is for it to be operational in spring or summer 2011.

The entire cost of this project is close to \$10 million. The exact cost will depend on the final design of the interior. The structure is big enough to handle alternative energy, but may not need that if everything goes through with the grid connection.

Earlier this month Kirkwood Meadows PUD sold \$5.5 million worth of bond anticipation notes to help fund the power plant.

Those general obligation bonds will be repaid through property taxes, water and wastewater fees. Electrical users won't be hit until the sale of Mountain Utilities goes through. Mountainsprings Kirkwood is selling the utility to KMPUD.

The sale of the land between the two entities closed this month. The sale of the utility is expected to close in June 2011 after the California Public Utility Commission signs off on everything.

What skiers will notice this winter in regards to the powerhouse is parking near Red Cliffs has been eliminated. Even though 80 spaces were lost, more than three times that number have been created slopeside. This means less walking.

The theory is residents and visitors will have uninterrupted electrical service as the changes take place.

If Mother Nature cooperates, expect the lifts at Kirkwood to be spinning before Thanksgiving – via the Cummins engines.