

Controversial Boulder Bay project OK'd, Biltmore is gone

By Kathryn Reed

KINGS BEACH – Depending on who one listens to, the Boulder Bay project is either going to be the gold standard for redevelopment in the Lake Tahoe Basin or will be the worst thing to ever be approved by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

On a 12-1 vote, the Governing Board on April 27 approved the more than \$150 million project. Mara Bresnick voted no on everything concerning the project. (Board member Byron Sher left before the vote, but said before he left that he would have voted no.)



Boulder Bay is designed to revitalize Crystal Bay.

The multi-phase project will obliterate the outdated Tahoe Biltmore in Crystal Bay and in its place will be the Boulder Bay Resort & Wellness Center. This is the brainchild of Roger Wittenberg, who made his money as co-founder of Trex Company.

As the last of the 80 people who commented on the project

during the public hearing Wednesday, Wittenberg told the board that after four years of back-and-forth with the TRPA, he is not going away. He encouraged the board to approve the project unanimously to send a message to the naysayers. While he didn't get that, he can now move forward.

"There will be two phases, with the bulk of the utilities, BMPs, new roads, and major concrete pour in the first phase," project manager Brian Helm said. This allows the existing facility to keep operating.

In a perfect world, construction could begin in May 2012, though with paperwork (aka permitting process) that still needs to occur, dirt may not be turned until 2013.

The first phase is likely to take two seasons – which in the basin is May 1-Oct. 15 in terms of being able to move dirt.

What was approved was the final environmental impact statement, an amendment to Chapter 22 of the TRPA rules regarding height of buildings, and acceptance of the Community Enhancement Project.

Eight structures will be built. The number of hotel units will go from 111 to 275 at the end of build-out. Fifty-nine units will be whole ownership. Fourteen will be affordable housing – with another 10 units also designed for employees to be constructed off-site.

As a sign of the decline of gaming in the region, the area devoted for gambling will drop from 22,400 square feet to 10,000.

The four casinos in the Crystal Bay corridor – like their counterparts on the South Shore – are outdated. The North Shore gaming venues were built in the 1930s and '40s.

Sticking points

Of the 80 people who voiced their opinions Wednesday, 58 were

for the project, 16 against and six were in the middle.

The League to Save Lake Tahoe voiced its displeasure with the project mostly in terms of overall size and the height amendment.

Rochelle Nason, executive director of the League, told *Lake Tahoe News* her group will gather and debrief – as they do with all decisions like this one.

While Nason was at the meeting, a staff member spoke on behalf of the League during the public hearing.

Most of the people who had mixed feelings about Boulder Bay shared the League's concerns.

Passion ran strong from all sides, though it was civil discourse. The morning presentation on the project took three hours. After lunch the public spent about four hours giving input. Then the board deliberated for more than three hours before the vote was taken.

With minutia to detail, the board took a break at 8:22pm, resuming at 8:43pm. The votes were taken at 9:25pm with adjournment right after that.

While the height issue received much discussion, it was repeatedly pointed out that the amendment could only be applied to other projects in this community plan area – not universally throughout the basin.

This is an important fact because the Homewood project that is also in the TRPA process wants to be granted a height variance.

Some of the problem is how TRPA measures the height of buildings. The controversy is when a structure is built on a slope. Instead of measuring from the foundation to the roof at each spot, height is essentially calculated by the lowest point to the highest point.

Traffic was another major sticking point. The environmental document says vehicle miles traveled will be reduced. Many who spoke took issue with how this statement came to be.

VMT is a huge component of air quality measurements.

Mixed use is designed to reduce vehicle miles traveled. This is because people have what they want in one place instead of needing to make multiple stops.

But one could easily argue casinos by nature are mixed use based on being a hotel, casino, having restaurants and sometimes a spa – meaning this new project may not change how people travel to the site on Highway 28.

About an hour was spent by the board discussing how traffic studies are done, what goes into them, the standards of the studies and validity of them.

What the public wanted to know is how Wittenberg wants to increase patronage with a new complex, but traffic will be less. That question was never answered.

Although Boulder Bay has to put money into public transit, it's a well-known fact people who live and visit the basin like to drive their cars. This was obvious by the full parking lot at North Tahoe Event Center and lack of carpooling.

Another concern was the transfer of tourist accommodation units – including 72 from the old Colony Inn in South Lake Tahoe to Boulder Bay.

Some guarantees

The failed convention center project in South Lake Tahoe that has left the South Shore with a more blighted eyesore of concrete and rebar than the rundown buildings that had been there before was repeatedly brought up.

No one wants another hole in the basin. To help combat that,

Wittenberg is going to have to prove he has financing before he can break ground.

Another bone of contention is erosion control measures (best management practices) have only been temporary since Wittenberg bought the property a handful of years ago. The reasoning being he would have to undo those as construction took place.

Board member Clem Shute proposed changing the five-year mandate to have a bond to fund BMPs to be extended to 20 years. This is to ensure that if the project goes belly-up, the property owner is still doing the basics to keep sediment from going into the lake. This was added to the requirements.

When the project is done, it will reduce the amount of sediment reaching Lake Tahoe by 90 percent – going to 3,500 pounds a year.

Another thing the project will do is bring jobs to the area. It's estimated Boulder Bay will employ more than 200 people.

For more information about the Boulder Bay project, go online.