

Burke Creek, Rabe Meadow plans moving forward

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Plans to reroute Burke Creek under Highway 50 are getting under way in the first phase of a long-term project to restore Rabe Meadow.

Douglas County Commissioners last week requested \$100,000 from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Stream Environment Zone Fund to design the Burke Creek portion of the project. The request came after the TRPA board approved the money at its July 27 meeting.

The Nevada Tahoe Conservation District, which is overseeing the project, has sent a letter to half a dozen Lake Tahoe Basin environmental consulting firms asking for statements of qualifications, according to Mahmood Azad, principal engineer and fisheries biologist with the conservation district and previously the Douglas County engineer.



Burke Creek in Stateline carries tons of sediment into Lake Tahoe.

Photos/Kathryn Reed

The district will choose a firm from among those contacted and try to negotiate a contract in time to seek approval from its board of directors on Aug. 18, said Azad. The district hopes to have the project design completed by year-end and start work in 2012.

"It could go a long, long way to filtering water that comes off (Highway) 50 and go a long way to improve lake clarity," Azad said.

Currently, Burke Creek, which was relocated when an airport was built in Rabe Meadow in the 1940s, runs over Highway 50, collecting road sediment that ends up in Lake Tahoe.

Azad said the Burke Creek portion of the project is on a fast track, while the overall restoration of Rabe Meadow is on a slow track and could take up to a decade to complete. That will include removing nonnative grasses that were introduced to the meadow when it was used for grazing cattle as well as restoring the many springs that once flowed into the meadow.

"Sagebrush and pine trees are starting to encroach," Azad said. "Rabe Meadow is a filtration system and it is not functioning correctly."

The conservation district is now working with the U.S. Forest Service, which owns Rabe Meadow, to secure a \$300,000 grant for the restoration project, Azad said. Nevada Department of Transportation is also providing \$200,000 in funding. The \$600,000 in funding from the TRPA, NDOT and the USFS will cover the initial design of the project, Azad said. The total cost of the project will not be known until the master plan is completed as part of the design.



Rabe Meadow is part of the long-term restoration plans.

The project could reduce the Burke Creek area's sediment flow into the lake by as much as 85 percent to 95 percent, according to Azad. He added the exact amount is unknown because the project covers what he calls a subwatershed of a larger watershed.

"Wetlands, by their nature, if functioning properly, will take almost all sediment out," Azad said.

The area's restoration will also attract more wetlands avian and the raptors who prey on them as well as becoming a suitable breeding ground for the Lahontan cutthroat trout that are being continually released into the area's waters.

"The biggest positive impacts will be on the fisheries," said Azad.

The Stateline restoration project has been in the works for years, with the TRPA as the lead agency on the project starting in 2007. In 2009, TRPA published a report on Burke Creek restoration, funded with \$500,000 in Southern Nevada Public Land Management Act money. In the last year, Douglas County took over the role of lead agency.

The 4-mile creek runs through several private properties, including Sierra Colina, the single- and multi-residential project, which has been involved in the restoration work from

the start. The League to Save Lake Tahoe has stalled the project by filing a lawsuit.

In 2006, the developers undertook their own study, done by Northwest Hydraulic Consultants, to evaluate their parcel but also to give the TRPA, USFS and Douglas County engineering ideas, said Steve Kenninger who, with Gail Jaquish, owns the 18-acre Sierra Colina site.

Kenninger said he's not aware of the details of the conservation district's plans, but that he was fully supportive of the plans laid out in the design drawn up by Winzler & Kelly in the original TRPA study.

"Therefore, we are unaware of the nature or proposed design of the 'new' Burke Creek Restoration Project and are unable to specifically comment on that design, or whether any anticipated changes could conflict with the Sierra Colina project," Kenninger said in an email to *Lake Tahoe News*. "However, we reiterate Sierra Colina's support for a Burke Creek Restoration project being implemented, and Sierra Colina's continued desire to cooperate with the county."

Sierra Colina donated 10.7 acres of its parcel to Douglas County for public recreation and open space, and 2.4 acres of that is the area needed to conduct creek restoration on the property.

The creek also runs through Tahoe Beach Club, a 20-acre site for estate homes and condominiums at the end of Kahle Drive that is still a mobile home park.

"We're doing 2 acres of stream zone restoration ourselves, hopefully in cooperation with the agencies," said Tom Castaneda, vice president of Tahoe Beach Club. "We've spoken to the Forest Service, although we haven't talked to anyone in six or seven months. But we're very willing to be cooperative."

The restoration work was part of its environmental impact statement filed to gain approval from the TRPA for the development.

Approved three years ago, the Tahoe Beach Club is working to raise financing for the \$200 million project from private equity interests who are more prepared to invest in it than are the banks, Castaneda told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Burke Creek also runs through the property where the Nugget Building is located, but owner Chuck Bluth said he was unaware of the project and had not been contacted by anyone about it.