

Washoe Meadows golf course drives wedge between users

By Kathryn Reed

A river runs through it – and that’s one of the problems as well as one of the things that make this area on the outskirts of South Lake Tahoe so beautiful.

Washoe Meadows State Park and Lake Valley Recreation Area are places even residents of the South Shore can’t locate on a map. This is one of the few state parks that is undeveloped – no signs, no trail markers – definitely no camping or concessionaire. The recreation area is better known as home of Lake Tahoe Golf Course in Meyers.



Part of Washoe Meadows State Park may be turned into a golf course. Photos/Kathryn Reed

The areas are side-by-side, with no true indication of any property line. They share the Upper Truckee River running through the landscape. Therein lies the problem.

Various sections of the river have been or are slated to be reconfigured to restore the Upper Truckee to its natural

meander. The goal is to reduce sediment reaching Lake Tahoe and to create a natural flowing river that floods its bank, which in turns restores meadows and provides appropriate habitat.

It's the 1.5 miles of river belonging to the State Parks system that is taking center stage this month.

State Parks commissioners are slated to vote on the final environmental impact report Oct. 21. Alternative 2 is the preferred course of action. This would likely mean moving nine of the existing holes of the 18-hole course onto what is now State Parks property from the Recreation Area.

The original 1984 statute that came out of the lawsuit that resulted in State Parks owning the land says 777 acres were acquired by the state – which includes the state park and recreation area. The final EIR says the existing acreage in Lake Valley Recreation Area is 173 acres and would go to 211 if alternative 2 were approved; and Washoe Meadows has 608 acres and would become 570 in alternative 2. That's from Volume V Page 5-3. However, Appendix K contradicts those numbers, saying what exists in the recreation area are 155 acres and it would go to 195; while the state park acreage is 628 and would go to 588.

An economic study indicates keeping the golf course a full 18-holes is preferable than reducing it to nine holes or making it an 18-hole executive course like Tahoe Paradise, which is on the other side of Highway 50.

It would be the concessionaire who would pay to essentially rebuild the golf course, but in turn it would be less income for State Parks at the get-go because the contract would be for less per year. State Parks contends in the long run it would be a financial gain for the state agency.

(A year-to-year lease is in place now until a decision about the river and golf course's futures are decided.)

There are disagreements about whether river restoration is needed. There is no argument the river has been changed by man – mostly to accommodate logging and grazing needs from decades ago. But with the runoff from urban areas being the primary cause of the decline of lake clarity, some question why millions of dollars in taxpayer money is continuing to be spent on restoring Upper Truckee River.

Cyndie Walck, State Parks hydrologist, said that no one is mandating her agency restore the river, but at some point her agency must comply with Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board's total maximum daily load standards. That unfunded mandate is being passed from the federal EPA to the state board to landowners in the Lake Tahoe Basin to reduce fine sediment from their respective properties that reach Lake Tahoe.

Walck told *Lake Tahoe News* that without funding to restore the river and to rebuild the golf course, neither would happen. Money does not exist at this point, but often becomes available once environmental documents are in place.

"The EIR lays out what we think the conceptual design of the river and golf course would be," Walck said. "If approved, then we [get a] design contract to get grades right and river meander right."

But there is a vocal group that believes the conceptual aspects of the preferred alternative are all out of whack.

Two members of the Washoe Meadows Community, a group dedicated to not altering the state park, this month gave this reporter a tour of what would be changed if alternative 2 were approved. On their website is a map that may printed to walk the route where changes are likely to occur.

This was a much different tour compared to what Walck led reporters on a year ago. That tour is the one parks commissioners will be given next week.

A notable difference is the State Parks tour enters from the golf course, shows the deteriorating banks of the river, goes into what looks like disturbed area and convincingly makes the point – why not make this area look better with a golf course?

The private tour that starts from a trail off Grizzly Mountain Road is equally convincing of their point-of-view – that this land should remain untouched.

“Where is the holistic view of the ecosystem?” asked Krissi Russell, who lives near the park.

“This provides a wildlife corridor,” Russell said as she walked near a fen.

The EPA defines a fen as, “... peat-forming wetlands that receive nutrients from sources other than precipitation: usually from upslope sources through drainage from surrounding mineral soils and from groundwater movement. Fens differ from bogs because they are less acidic and have higher nutrient levels. They are therefore able to support a much more diverse plant and animal community. These systems are often covered by grasses, sedges, rushes, and wildflowers. Some fens are characterized by parallel ridges of vegetation separated by less productive hollows.”

Walck says two studies have been done that say the fen will not be disturbed.

Lynne Paulson with the Washoe Meadows Community is enlisting the aid of a UNR professor to dispute the State Parks view.

Paulson’s group says the proposed changes will reduce public access to the Upper Truckee River in this area, while Walck says the opposite.

“It’s not fair for them to say we are trying to keep it for ourselves when they keep (the park) a secret,” Paulson said. “It is unusual to downgrade a state park.”

She believes if State Parks had put money into Washoe Meadows in the last 27 years then maybe it would be better known, used more and others would not want it to go from a natural environment to pristine grass for golfers.

They are not against the river restoration, but against a golf course on what is now State Parks land. Their preference is alternative 3 – making the course a nine-hole or executive course.

Moving the course will bring it to within 200-feet of some homes which now boarder a state park.

It would not go into the meadow where the Celio barn is, but it would bring it closer to that icon.

The Washoe Meadows Community is concerned other relics of Tahoe's past will be disturbed as well, like the grinding rocks used by the Washoe Indians (which are part of their tour) and the old spring house (outside the tour) area.

Walck points to the two projects restoring Angora Creek on State Parks land as evidence of improvements to the property and her agency's ability to do successful waterway upgrades.

In a week the State Parks commissioners will be asked to:

- Adjust the classification of certain land areas at Washoe Meadows State Park and Lake Valley State Recreation Area by modifying the boundary of the two units.
- Amend the General Plan for Lake Valley SRA.
- Certify the Upper Truckee River Restoration and Golf Course Reconfiguration Project environmental impact report.

The final EIR is in volumes four and five, which are downloadable, and are each about 1½ inches thick.

Dates to know:

- Oct. 20 at 1:30pm at the clubhouse of the Lake Tahoe Golf Course state parks commissioners will tour the proposed changes. Members of the public are requested to contact Louis Nastro at lnastro@parks.ca.gov prior to Oct. 17 if planning to attend.

- Oct. 21 9am at the clubhouse of the Lake Tahoe Golf Course state parks commissioners will vote on the environmental documents regarding swapping Washoe Meadows State Park and Lake Valley Recreation Area land. Here is the meeting agenda.

- Dec. 7 9:30am, Tahoe Regional Planning Agency APC votes on the EIR at the Stateline office.

- Dec. 15 9am TRPA Governing Board vote on certification of final EIR at Stateline office.

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