

Public-private deal stops tons of silt from clouding Tahoe

By Anne Knowles

Installation of a stormwater treatment system at the Sierra Colina Village development site this week marks the completion of the first private-public partnership project many say is the kind of work that is key to Lake Tahoe's future.

The system will filter, treat and store runoff from the development and from Echo Drive. It is part of a larger, Burke Creek watershed facility being built by Douglas County to treat stormwater runoff from Lake Village Drive.

According to Douglas County, the entire project will reduce sediment loads into the lake by 74 tons annually.



Environmental improvements are being made to the Sierra Colina site before construction begins.

Photo/Steve Kenninger

The Sierra Colina portion of the water quality improvement project (WQIP) is being paid for by the developers of the 18-acre site, Steve Kenninger and Gail Jaquish, who plan to build 41 market-rate and nine moderate-income, deed-restricted dwellings that will be Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design certified.

The private developers funded the initial \$25,000 study conducted by Northwest Hydraulic Consultants of South Lake Tahoe and used by Douglas County to plan the system, and spent \$250,000 for the construction of the Sierra Colina portion and will likely spend another \$250,000 to maintain it. (Per agreement, the county will maintain the entire system and invoice Sierra Colina for its portion.)

The county, through an \$878,600 grant from the Nevada Department of State Lands and an \$876,600 grant from the U.S. Forest Service, is spending \$1.76 million to design and build the rest of the WQIP. The WQIP was designed by Nichols Consulting Engineers in Stateline and built by Peek Construction, which has an office in Stateline.

“The entire project would not be as efficient or as effective if the Sierra Colina group had not decided to partner on it,” said Mahmood Azad, principal engineer/fisheries biologist for the Nevada Tahoe Conservation District and the former Douglas County engineer who is managing the project for the county. “If we’d both done separate projects, we would have spent more money and it would not be as efficient.”

With the cost of restoring Lake Tahoe clarity to 80 feet by 2025 estimated at \$1.5 billion, while public funds continue to dry up, everyone from Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval to Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Director Joanne Marchetta has been saying that the only way to achieve the clarity goal is through private-public partnerships like the WQIP project.

One obstacle, though, may be convincing private parties that

the cost of such endeavors is in their best interest. The Sierra Colina project price tag, for example, was \$525,000 – or more than three times the \$160,000 coverage mitigation fee the developers could have paid instead.

“The TRPA code gives us two options,” Kenninger told *Lake Tahoe News*. “We could pay the coverage mitigation fee or create a new public water quality project if you can show you completely mitigate the runoff from the private project’s coverage.”

Kenninger said they studied the issue and found that the land, even undeveloped, was creating problems.

“The status quo was hurting water quality,” said Kenninger, and the development as planned would create an additional load.

Kenninger said he wanted to completely mitigate the load caused by the new project rather than pay the mitigation fee.

“Public-private partnerships haven’t happened before because of the cost,” Kenninger said. “We wanted to show everybody we can work together. This project is a model because future federal and state EIP funds are going away. In return, they’ll allow redevelopment to happen. And the revenue from that pays for the private contribution to treat public stormwater.”

Kenninger and Jaquish went forward with environmental improvements even though the development is tied up in court.

Azad said the county is now looking for potential other projects to work on with private parties, but that nothing has been indentified yet.

“The lesson I’ve learned from all this is it takes longer and requires more manpower upfront,” Azad said. “But it ends up being more efficient and cheaper in the end.”