

Lawsuit prevents Homewood from starting development

By Kathryn Reed

Homewood Mountain Resort's desire to reinvent the West Shore ski resort is an "ill-conceived, inadequately studied, and environmentally-disruptive development project ... threatening one of our nation's iconic landscapes."

At least that is what documents filed Jan. 5 in U.S. District Court in Sacramento say.



An artist's rendering of what Homewood's owners would like it to become.

Earthjustice on behalf of Friends of the West Shore and Tahoe Sierra Club is suing to stop the project that was approved Dec. 14 by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.

Defendants in the suit are TRPA, Placer County, Placer County Board of Supervisors, Homewood Village Resorts and JMA Ventures. The latter is the San Francisco-based company that owns the ski area.

While approval of the project has been unanimous in every vote taken by everybody that had a say in the development and master plan for the ski resort, it has always been controversial.

Today the area is a throwback to years gone by. The resort, when one drives by on Highway 89, looks like something a Warren Miller movie would show to reflect skiing of yesteryear. What Art Chapman, JMA's CEO, envisions is a five-star resort.

There is no doubt the look, feel and type of visitor would dramatically change. That's what Chapman wants to happen. It's not what the Friends of the West Shore want.

"We welcome a revitalized Homewood Ski Area, but the current project is simply too large," Mason Overstreet, conservation director of Friends of the West Shore, said in a statement. "A smaller resort in scale with the surrounding community would still bring in hundreds of jobs for residents and millions of dollars in revenue. We must be careful not to destroy the beauty that attracts visitors to Lake Tahoe in the first place."

The plaintiffs want the environmental documents to be declared invalid.

The lawsuit says, "... the Environmental Impact Report and Environmental Impact Study (EIR-EIS) prepared jointly by TRPA and the county failed to properly study and mitigate the project's effects on traffic, air quality, water quality, noise, scenic resources, groundwater, and soil conservation, in violation of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and the Compact. Thus, the Homewood amendments and project stand to make matters worse."

Joanne Marchetta, TRPA executive director, said in a statement, "It's unfortunate that this lawsuit could divide the community at a time when we need to work together more

than ever. TRPA continues to believe that lawsuits are not the best path to sustainability in the Tahoe basin.”

A major issue for challengers is TRPA’s allowing amendments to its codes – essentially disregarding the current Regional Plan, which in effect is the bible by which TRPA is supposed to live by – and by de facto, everyone in the basin’s law book.

The 1987 Regional Plan was supposed to be updated in 2007. The current date for expected approval is December this year, with draft environmental documents associated with it released in March.

Some of the changes expected in the Regional Plan Update – like to the height and density rules – are being incorporated into projects through amendments. Such amendments were part of the Boulder Bay project that passed TRPA muster last April and does not face a legal challenge.

The Governing Board and TRPA staff believe the project would be a boon for the environment. That was the overriding reason for approving the development.