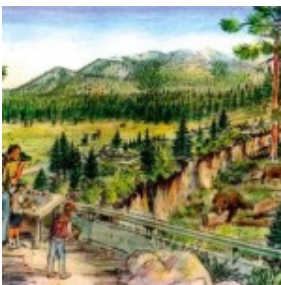


Permanent location to rehab wildlife in LTWC's sights

By Kathryn Reed

MEYERS – If it's true getting a step in the door is the hardest part to realizing a dream, then that step may have literally been taken this month by the Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care board of directors based on where they conducted their meeting.

They met in a house at the bottom of the Old Meyers Grade in what is now a vacation rental. But that nearly 3,700-square-foot house on those 16-plus acres that back up to U.S. Forest Service property is on land zoned recreational/commercial and comes with 130,000-square-feet of coverage. That could make all the dreams of the Millhams come to fruition.



A conceptual drawing of what the bear facility at Lake Tahoe Wildlife Rehabilitation and Education Center could look like.

For 34 years, Tom and Cheryl Millham have been operating the

animal rehabilitation center. The animals are in cages in their back yard. They function with a special use permit from El Dorado County.

They are tired. They want to enjoy their retirement by not being tied to the phone to rescue animals, care for them and then release them.

While in many ways they are a mom-and-pop operation, Cheryl Millham's knowledge is coveted. She is often asked to be a guest lecturer. She knows how migration patterns have changed over the decades; she knows what animals were here 30 years ago are no longer here. She is a wealth of information.

The Millhams work closely with the state Department of Fish and Game, especially with bear releases. Another cub is slated to go back into the wild this week near San Luis Obispo.

But the Millhams have had their dreams dashed before. Parcels have come and gone as possible locations. Not only do they want to move their operation, but also expand it to include a larger education center, a place to have conferences, and a sanctuary to let the animals that cannot be released call home.

The board is hoping this was the first of many meetings in a permanent home.

"This is the closest now to having a done deal," Tom Millham told *Lake Tahoe News*. And even now the deal is far from being done.

Before the nonprofit is on the deed, the money needs to be secured for the property that is listed at \$1.99 million. This is less than the \$5 million the owners wanted in 2007.

"They are open to being creative," Rene Brejc, who is listing the property, said of the trust that owns the property.

Tom Davis, who is on the LTWC board, pointed out that how the

center has operated for the past 34 years is not how will be able to operate in the next 34 years. He said veterinarian officials from UC Davis have expressed an interest in having a teaching component at the center about wildlife.

Talk that night was about how perhaps a foundation or investors need to be sought and a significant fundraising drive initiated.

Beyond the payment for the property, significant improvements need to be made – from parking, to building cages, to upgrading the water system.

The property now uses a well, but with the type of facility the Millhams envision, officials would require the center serviced by South Tahoe Public Utility District. This would help it better comply with fire regulations as well.

Jumping through county and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency hoops could be problematic. Preliminary discussions with both agencies have taken place.

There have been meetings where planning officials have said they worry about how much soil a 300-pound bear will compact at the wildlife center. This, despite the fact that bears and other wildlife roam the woods everyday without any apparent degradation to Lake Tahoe's clarity. And plenty of hefty people compact soil, too, and they aren't told to stop doing that.

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who was at the board meeting, said she would not let the county be a stumbling block. She is also on the TRPA Governing Board.

Julie Regan with TRPA, when contacted by *Lake Tahoe News*, said, "It's important to find a solution that works. (LTWC) is an important community asset. When El Dorado County brings forward their local area plan, I'm sure they would want to look at what land use changes would come after the adoption of

the Regional Plan.”

While other places have facilities like what the Millhams and the LTWC board envision, one does not exist in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

Mike Dill with Aspen Environmental Services along with the Millhams has met with TRPA and county officials. Issues like needing to fence the entire property could be a stumbling block. The fact that TRPA does not allow accessory uses for entities falling under “public health and safety” is another issue. The building permit expires this fall.

It has been agreed a bridge that would hold the weight of a golf cart could be built across Echo Creek.

Despite the hurdles, the Millhams, board members, the consultant, the county supervisor and the real estate agent agreed on two things – Lake Tahoe Wild Care would not close and a solution would be found.