

Douglas County shines light on Vail Resorts as example of public-private partnership

By Anne Knowles

MINDEN – Public-private partnerships, including the commercial use of public lands, dominated the discussion at the 18th annual Critical Issues Conference hosted by the Business Council of Douglas County.

Speakers from both sides of the equation talked about a federal lands bill stuck in the U.S. Senate and the bill passed last year allowing ski resorts to use public lands in the summer, as well as efforts to make Lake Tahoe a ski destination on par with Colorado and Utah.

“We need the private sector to invest and take risks. And we need the public sector to balance regulations and its public service role,” Steve Mokrohisky, Douglas County manager, said at the Sept. 27 event at the Carson Valley Inn in Minden.



Vail Resorts is making a splash at Lake Tahoe,

including Northstar C00
Bill Rock in 2011
opening Zephyr Lodge.
Photo/LTN file

“Vail hasn’t succeeded in a vacuum. It’s partnered with other public and private entities to make progress,” he said, also citing South Shore’s other large corporate presence, Edgewood Companies, as a model of cooperation between business and government.

Bill Rock, vice president and chief operating officer of Northstar in Truckee, one of three Tahoe-area ski resorts now owned by Vail Resorts Inc., spoke about plans for Kirkwood, Heavenly and Northstar.

“Kirkwood has been a great addition for us. It’s not our typical resort. It’s smaller, authentic, has a lot of character,” Rock said.

He said the company plans to operate the resort for a year before determining how it will invest in the property. When Vail purchased Kirkwood in February, Blaise Carrig, president of the company’s Mountain Division, said Vail liked its existing master plan calling for new lifts and a restaurant at the top of Chair 2.

Investments made at its other Tahoe resorts over the years include the 16,000-square-foot Tamarack Lodge at Heavenly, the 700-seat Zephyr Lodge at Northstar and additional lifts and beefed up snowmaking capabilities. Rock said the company is also known for outspending its competitors on maintenance.

Vail said sales of season passes for the upcoming season were up 17 percent during its year-end financial results announcement on Tuesday. The company doesn’t release data on specific resorts or of its two Tahoe passes, the \$439 Tahoe Local Pass and the \$399 Tahoe Value Pass, which give holders

access to all three resorts. Skier visits at its Tahoe resorts during the 2011-12 season were down 22 percent, and down 9 percent at its Colorado venues, due to the dry winter.

Rock also talked about the Ski Area Recreational Opportunity Enhancement Act enacted last year that lets ski resorts located on public lands operate summer commercial enterprises with U.S. Forest Service approval. Vail applied to the USFS two months ago for summer operations at its Vail Mountain resort in Colorado. The plan is called Epic Discovery and includes ziplines, rope swings, an education center, an alpine slide, hiking and mountain bike trails and a guided Segway tour on trails.

Vail is planning something similar for Heavenly including hiking trails.

Rock told *Lake Tahoe News* the company wants to bring more events to Heavenly like the U.S. Freestyle Championships, announced in April, and a yet-to-be announced or scheduled high-roller event that would couple card games with a snowboard competition.

All of this is part of an effort to make Lake Tahoe a ski destination to rival Colorado and Utah, said Rock. He said more work needs to be done to accomplish that, including improving transportation to and from the Reno Tahoe International Airport and inside the basin, and adding more internationally-branded lodging like the Ritz-Carlton at Northstar.

The business council event also included Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., via a recorded video, and Pam Robinson, Heller's state policy director, as well as Rep. Mark Amodei, R-Reno, on a conference call.

Both Nevada officials talked about the need for more availability of public lands for commercial use, citing the so-called Yerington lands bill, which would allow for expanded

copper mining in Yerington, resulting in an estimated 800 jobs. The bill passed the House, but has yet to have a hearing in the Senate.

Robinson also said the federal government, which she said creates nine new regulations a day, needs to ease up on business restrictions to help the economy. She also said the senator, who is in a heated campaign to keep his seat and who hosted the recent Lake Tahoe Environmental Summit, is encouraged by changes happening at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

“One example,” said Robinson “is the unanimous vote on the Edgewood project.”