

LTWC in talks with investors to grow rehab facility

By Kathryn Reed

The sound of hope fills Tom Millham's voice when he talks about the possibility of investors coming forward who could transform Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care into a sustainable enterprise for generations to come.

For more than 30 years Tom and Cheryl Millham have been rehabbing wild animals in their spacious backyard. Long ago they outgrew the facility that is in El Dorado County, on the edge of South Lake Tahoe. And all those years they have been looking to move to a more suitable location that would also allow them to create an education component to the center.

Reason after reason the center has stayed put.



Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care is caring for a record number of bears. Photo/LTWC

At tonight's LTWC board meeting, the volunteers of this nonprofit will be updated on the two people who have expressed interest in putting up what could be millions of dollars to buy a 3,700-square-foot house on 16-plus acres that back up to

U.S. Forest Service property at the bottom of Old Meyers Grade, as well to pay for the work needed to make LTWC more than it is today.

“We haven’t heard that part yet,” Tom Millham said of what the investors might want in return for their cash. “None of that has been discussed yet. We are still in the initial stages of discussions, but at least we have someone now we can focus on.”

Millham would not discuss who the potential investors are so as not to jeopardize negotiations. He said one is from the region, while the other is out of the area.

He told *Lake Tahoe News* if things progress smoothly and quickly, the rehab part of the operation could move to the Echo Creek Estate location by the end of next summer. This is assuming a decision by the backers is made by the end of the year.

“We know we can rebuild these nine cages in a fairly short amount of time,” Millham said.

Ben Fagan has been sketching some designs for possible cages.

The next phase would be the education center.

“It would have an amphitheater for shows and things like that; a store for retail; café; upstairs will be the board room, offices and living quarters for the person living on site; and custodial,” Millham explained.

The amphitheater may seat up to 200 people. It would be used to show educational films about wildlife, the facility, be a place for lectures, and also be a venue for community gatherings.

The idea is one person or a family would live onsite. It will not be the Millhams – they’ve had enough of that experience.

Mike Dill with Aspen Environmental Services has been working with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The original permit on the property was to have expired last month, but a two-year extension has been granted.

Millham relayed that TRPA and El Dorado County have been working cooperatively to make the wildlife center a reality at the Meyers location.

The need for this type of facility keeps increasing based on the numbers of animals LTWC rehabilitates each year. This season, which is usually wrapped up by now except for getting bears to hibernate, has been busy. The eight bears and six bobcats were each a record number.

The bears alone cost \$3,000 a month to feed. That will taper off soon as they transition to hibernation.

“It’s not stopping. We got a red tail hawk on Saturday,” Millham said. Two golden eagles still remain, with the likelihood of one starting to exercise next week for release. The other is not likely to make it back to the wild so it will need to find another home.

One of the bobcats will also not return to the wild. It had become too comfortable around people. It’s next home could be Six Flags Marine World in Vallejo. Folks from that facility were in town Monday to take a look at the little guy.

While Lake Tahoe Wildlife Care has interested investors, the Millhams know it could fall through. That is why they are continuing to seek out others who may be interested in helping LTWC evolve. Then, there’s always the need for donations to keep the animals fed.

More info about LTWC is online – including webcams of the bears.