

Opinion: Electric line expansion is a bad idea

By Ann Nichols

Today the forests between Kings Beach and Tahoe City are connected by the Tahoe Rim Trail, nature trails, dirt roads and a mostly paved route located at the summit of Highway 267 known as Mt. Watson Road or the "Fiberboard Freeway".

This great North Shore recreation asset has it all: views of Lake Tahoe, access to Watson Lake, Jeep and equestrian trails, snowmobiling, cross country skiing, snowshoeing, and hiking. All are close to town, yet not marred by unsightly power lines.

That's all about to change if Liberty Utilities and CalPeco, Liberty's parent company, get approval for their proposed \$45 million plus project. The company wants to double the existing power to serve the demands of new projects with prominent new power lines; think 1,200 units at Squaw, 1,000 more at Northstar Highlands, 760 units at the top of Highway 267 put forth by East West Partners, and the new lifts at Northstar.

The power company folks want to run the new power line between Kings Beach and Tahoe City along the Mt. Watson Road. The poles will visually dominate the pristine forest lands. They claim it will be easier to access and maintain the poles. That's a given, but at what environmental cost?

The new thicker and taller poles will exacerbate their visual effect and degrade existing views. Here are some disturbing project highlights:

1. Trees removed: 47,000 (whole project including along Highway 267)

2. Damaging stream environment zones by removing 1,542 trees.
3. Power poles increase in diameter from an average of 16 inches to a maximum of 4.5 feet for self-supporting poles.
4. Power pole heights increases up to 12 feet or as much as a total height of 92 feet (nine stories). Most poles are now 40-foot high
5. Right-of-way increases width from 30 feet to 40 feet along the new Mt. Watson Road line.
6. Trees and vegetation within 150 feet of the power lines can be cleared producing a scar in the forest.
7. 7.5 miles of new right-of-way within the basin

Who will stand the cost of the expansion? A measly 49,000 ratepayers between North and West Shore and pay attention folks on the California side of South Shore, you are on the hook too. The power company is guaranteed an 11.8 percent return on these infrastructure improvements and it is likely we will see our power bills go up 20 to 30 percent. This huge project could easily run over \$50 million. It's a no lose situation for the power company, a boon for developers, but loaded with adverse effects for tourists, residents and wildlife.

Let's not lose our public areas and diminish the quality of a great recreational experience with the permanent installation of unsightly power poles. Leave the power lines where they are now ... they've served us well in that location since the '70s. Underground the new lines that will go through the east Kingswood neighborhood.

Do we really need five years of traffic impacts and 12,000 one-way truck trips? The basin is already 90 percent built out; is this major project absolutely necessary for Lake Tahoe? CalPeco, develop a project that won't negatively impact

our beautiful area.

Ann Nichols is president of the North Tahoe Preservation Alliance.