

Heavenly makes pitch for summer expansion



The four-line zipline being built near Tamarack Lodge will open in summer 2015. Photo Copyright 2014 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Snow isn't the only thing Heavenly wants to be known for. The South Shore resort is making substantial efforts to be a playground in the summer, too.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board on Sept. 24 got a taste for what Heavenly Mountain Resort wants to become.

"Guests want more than a sightseeing experience," Heavenly COO Pete Sonntag said.

When the gondola opened in 2000 it was about getting skiers at the state line bed base onto the mountain without driving. A viewing deck near the top was about being a scenic lookout.

Gradually the resort has added non-winter activities, with this summer being the inauguration of three ropes courses and the resurrection of a zipline. But the resort is just beginning.

Ziplines, canopy tours, sky cycles, alpine coaster, and a mountain bike park are part of the resort's plans that are being studied in environmental documents.

The TRPA board heard a presentation Wednesday about the multi-million dollar on mountain transformation.

The mountain bike park will be on the Nevada side, outside the Lake Tahoe Basin – therefore outside TRPA's jurisdiction. It will not be as difficult as Northstar's park. It will have a connector route to the Tahoe Rim Trail and access via Van Sickle Bi-State Park.

A Governing Board member questioned how Heavenly would be able to manage capacity if people are in the park who have not paid. Andrew Strain, government affairs chief for the resort, said that is part of the monitoring that is being worked out.

A member of the public wondered if air quality issues had been addressed when it comes to taking people on guided mountain tours via vehicles. The roads to be used for this are ones that already exist.

Most of the development will be in three primary hubs that already are considered disturbed land because of the ski resort. The alpine coaster will be a modern day version of an alpine slide. It uses gravity to whisk people through the trees on an elevated course. The sky cycle has people pedaling 20 or 30 feet off the ground in the forest. It is proposed to go near the top of the gondola. A replica of a fire lookout will be constructed and used as a way to teach people about fire.

Education is a component Heavenly wants to weave into many of

its summer activities.

“It’s a different market for us than winter. For some it’s the first time they’ve set foot on a national forest,” Strain told the board. “We are partnering with the Nature Conservancy. They will drive the education experience.”

Ryan Galles, principal of Sierra House Elementary, said he could see how this will benefit his students. The school, which has an emphasis on fitness, already partners with Heavenly in the winter. He hopes to have similar opportunities when snow isn’t on the ground.

“Learning happens inside and outside the classroom,” Galles said.

Strain said careful planning has been done to ensure the structures that are built don’t impede the experience of skiers and snowboarders. Resort officials realize they are still primarily a winter destination. Most of the structures will be in the ground year-round even if they aren’t used.

“We will not be operating the ropes courses or ziplines this winter,” Sally Gunter, resort spokeswoman, told *Lake Tahoe News*.

That could change in future winters.

The mountain at complete build-out could handle 17,000 skiers a day. Today Heavenly sees about 10,000 a day at peak periods. This compares to summer where about 108,000 visit the resort all season. Projections are for that number to grow to 160,000 with the added amenities.

Most of the 13 people who spoke at the meeting had favorable things to say and recommended the board approve the project. (A vote will come after the final EIR/EIS are released. Comments on the draft are being taken until Oct 27.)

Besides the construction dollars that could start to flow to

the region next summer if the project is approved, it means an economic stimulus in other ways. What the current summer operations – one zipline and three ropes courses – have meant is 120 full-time jobs that didn't previously exist.

“We were able to take our best winter employees and offer them year-round employment,” Sonntag said.

Besides transitioning from a gaming-dominant economy to recreation, another emphasis of the powers that be has been on providing more than seasonal employment.

If the project is approved in the spring, construction would begin in phases in summer 2015. Some features would open in summer 2016, others the following year.