

Heavenly eyes epic construction season to begin evolution into year-round resort

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Going forward, Heavenly Mountain Resort will no longer be known as a just a ski resort. Its Epic Discovery project received unanimous approval from the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing board on Thursday.

“It’s conceivable if all the pieces fall into place, we could break ground on a handful of projects this summer,” Heavenly General Manager Pete Sonntag told *Lake Tahoe News* moments after the vote.

Still needing to be secured are approval from Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board and the final record of decision from the U.S. Forest Service.

Sonntag would not put a price tag on what will ultimately be a multi-million dollar endeavor.

Epic Discovery is Vail Resorts answer to creating year-round resorts. It is developing these adventure parks at Heavenly, and in Colorado at Vail and Breckenridge.



Heavenly's summer offerings are about to explode with Epic Discovery's approval. Photo Copyright 2015 Carolyn E. Wright

It's possible some of the activities will be accessible in the winter. It will allow Heavenly to be more of a year-round destination, though there will still be times when it will have to close. Annual maintenance to the gondola starts every September, which is why scenic rides are limited to weekends and then it is offline the entire month of October.

With the Forest Service in 2011 allowing ski resorts to expand recreation opportunities into the summer, ski areas started to turn their attention to things like ropes and canopy courses, alpine coasters and mountain biking. But the Forest Service is keeping a close eye on this transformation.

"We've required a phased construction to make sure we consider the effects on the natural environment," Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit Forest Supervisor Jeff Marsolais told the board. The USFS also wants to see designs when they are 30 and 60 percent complete to ensure they meet all the regulations.

Because these types of projects on national lands are new and

some of the components are not standard protocol, Marsolais' bosses in Washington weighed in on some items.

An issue that was raised through comments was how the proposed Panorama Trail would impact Van Sickle Bi-state Park.

The Forest Service, Heavenly, Tahoe Rim Trail Association and Tahoe Area Mountain Biking Association created an agreement to monitor the effects over time.

"This is a different way of doing business," Marsolais said of the adaptive management plan.

One thing he put the kibosh on was the proposed coaster in Sky Meadows because of the stream environmental zone, pine marten habitat and potential effects on skiing.

Andrew Strain, govern affairs guru for Heavenly, said the hub of the non-skiing fun will remain at Adventure Peak near the top of the gondola.

"We will be using developed areas of the ski resort," he said.

Heavenly will greatly expand beyond the ropes courses it opened last summer. Much of what will be constructed will continue to be off the ground fun.

The mountain bike park will be outside the basin on the Nevada side.

"Heavenly today is essentially the black hole of mountain biking," Strain said. Trails will connect to already established routes are that mostly known by locals.

For those who are a little less adventuresome or may have physical limits there will be tours of the mountain on existing roads via Heavenly vehicles.

Twenty people spoke at the March 26 meeting; all were in favor of the project.

(El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel recused herself because her daughter works for Vail Resorts in Colorado. This was her choosing even though legally she did not have to.)

Many of the comments underscored how this will allow Heavenly to hire people year-round. The economic impact has not been quantified, but many business owners see Epic Discovery as a potential boon to their bottom line by people extending their visits because there will be more to do on the South Shore.

Plus, it's in alignment with the desire of turning the region into a recreation destination.

Several people praised the educational component of the project; with the hope people will be better stewards of the land.

It was also pointed out that for many tourists this would be their first encounter with national forest land. It's an opportunity to educate them about what grows and lives in the forest, as well as the threat of fire.

Heavenly sees about 110,000 people on the mountain now during the summer and expects to increase that by about 50 percent. Traffic and parking are not expected to be an issue because the thinking is people who are already in town will be the users and this will not be destination unto itself.