

# TRPA approves Liberty electrical line upgrade

By Kathryn Reed

KINGS BEACH – Construction on a multi-million electrical upgrade of Liberty Utilities lines in the North Shore-Truckee area is expected to start this summer.

There was a brief tense moment Thursday morning at the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board when it looked like the project was not going to be approved.

Board member Clem Shute said there was no way he could approve the environmental documents that included phase three of the project because there was too much ambiguity in the language. Liberty reluctantly agreed issues regarding that phase could be handled at a later date.

With that compromise, the board unanimously approved the environmental document that affected phases one and two.

The U.S. Forest Service was waiting for the TRPA decision before the final record of decision was signed. That will be the last hurdle before the project can break ground.

“The poles and wiring are on order,” Kathy Carter, spokeswoman for the utility company, told *Lake Tahoe News*. The request for proposal is out and a contract will soon be signed with a contractor. Phase one is estimated to cost \$18 million.

Three people spoke at the April 23 meeting at the North Tahoe Events Center in Kings Beach. All live near where some of the construction will take place. Two of the three seemed to recently become aware of the project even though it has been discussed for four years and there have been multiple public meetings.

Neal Carney, representing the North Tahoe Citizens Action Alliance, questioned why undergrounding was not occurring – especially near neighborhoods.

Mike Smart, president of Liberty Utilities, told the board, “The thing with undergrounding is that it is more reliable, but it’s about eight times as expensive.”

He also explained how having a high voltage facility underground is problematic in snow country because it can be hard to get to the infrastructure needing repairs. Plus, it takes specialized crews to work on that type of equipment; crews Liberty does not employ.

Smart also acknowledged that all ratepayers will be paying for the improvements. Liberty will go the California Public Utility Commission upon completion of the project and ask for a rate increase. Liberty provides power to the entire California side of the Lake Tahoe Basin, Truckee, Alpine County and other places in Northern California.

The first phase is designed to have enough infrastructure in place that it could be used this winter even if all the work is not finished, according to Carter.

“This is for winter peaking issues,” Smart explained. Snowmaking at ski resorts and the influx of people to the basin make winter demand higher than any other time of year.

The last time Liberty hit its peak was the evening of Dec. 30, 2012. Smart said had more resorts being making snow or if the proposed gondola linking Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows were a reality, the peak would have been hit this past winter.

At peak times the diesel generators at the Kings Beach substation kick in. It’s also possible for the power to go out because the system is stressed.

According to Liberty, the 625 and 650 power lines are some of

the oldest in California, built in 1971 and 1959, respectively.

Upgrading the 650 line that runs along Highway 267 from Truckee to Kings Beach and several substations will occur in phase one. Phase two is upgrading the Northstar and Kings Beach substations. That will begin based on when the demand triggers this to be done. Phase three involves the 625 power line along Highway 28 from Tahoe City to Kings Beach. The start date is also contingent upon loads. The CPUC must approve the initiation of phases two and three even though it has already signed off on the entire project.

When all the work is done the lines and substations will have been upgraded from 60 kilovolt to 120kV.