

Opinion: Time to Keep Squaw True

By Tom Mooers

Even in the face of increasing opposition, massive development for Tahoe's Squaw Valley took another step forward last week when Placer County released a final version of the proposed plan.

Would-be developer KSL Capital Partners is asking Placer County for permission to build a series of high rises – including a 10-story tall indoor water park – in iconic Squaw Valley. According to Sierra conservationists, it would be development of a size, scale, and scope North Tahoe has never seen.

The latest version of proposed development in Squaw Valley is a matter of 'meet the new plan; same as the old plan'. It's still a blueprint for disaster that threatens everything we love about the Tahoe Sierra.

The fight over the future of Squaw Valley is shaping up as a pivotal moment in the long struggle between conservation and development in the Sierra Nevada.

KSL Capital Partners, a private equity firm based in Denver, purchased Squaw Valley in 2010, citing the property's "great growth potential". They filed an initial application for development entitlements in 2011 and followed up with a series of proposals, resulting in the final version of the "Village at Squaw Valley Specific Plan" last week.

The plan is available **online**.

Proposed development would remake Squaw Valley with a series of high rise condo projects with 1,500 new bedrooms – as many

as in three of the biggest casinos at Tahoe's Stateline combined, time share mansions in the mouth of Shirley Canyon, and a massive indoor amusement park with waterslides, fake rivers, arcades, and simulated sky-diving.

All told, the project would be so big it would take 25 years to construct.

Local residents, second homeowners, and conservationists have struck back with a grassroots campaign to Keep Squaw True.

Even though KSL's proposed nightmare just took another step towards becoming Tahoe's reality, we're committed to stopping the project and ensuring a sane future for Squaw.

More than 300 private citizens, regulatory agencies, neighboring jurisdictions, and conservation organizations wrote letters to Placer County during last summer's public comment period. And nearly all – 97 percent – of those letters expressed opposition to project approval or questioned the county's environmental analysis. Over the past several months an additional 80 individuals have written the Placer County Board of Supervisors urging them to reject the proposal.

Opponents point to a range of unacceptable impacts the project would have on North Tahoe, from the economic viability of local businesses to the brightness of stars in the night sky. The strategy of KSL seems to be to stay full steam ahead with their project – in spite of increasing opposition.

In last week's revised version, the total number of bedrooms (1,547) remains the same, the maximum building height (108 feet) is unchanged, and the proposed indoor water park would still have waterslides, fake rivers, and arcades.

Placer County's ongoing environmental review of the project has raised a number of potential problems.

Of particular concern: traffic. Tahoe is increasingly infamous

for gridlock. Earlier this winter, the California Highway Patrol turned back cars trying to exit Highway 89 toward Squaw Valley; there was simply no room for more cars.

Yet the proposed development would add an estimated 8,410 new daily car trips to Tahoe traffic when traffic is already at its worst.

The horrific traffic projections raise a basic question. Do you want to spend your time in Tahoe enjoying the great outdoors – or stuck inside your car?

Reliability of the local water supply has also emerged as an important issue. Even during a winter of abundant snow, Squaw Valley is acutely aware of persistent drought and its limited watershed.

For years, the primary water provider in the valley has warned that their supplies are inadequate and that they need to build a pipe to import water from Martis Valley. Yet KSL claims there is plenty of water for their new development.

“It makes no sense to consider massive development in a place that is already worried about insecure water supplies,” says Isaac Silverman, staff attorney for Sierra Watch.

Some of the project’s demand for water would come from its proposed indoor water park. At 90,000 square feet, it would be as wide as a Walmart and more than twice as tall. KSL says they need it as a “wet amenity to compete with the lake” (as in Tahoe). Local residents feel otherwise.

Squaw Valley should be the kind of place where we introduce our kids to the wild wonders of the great outdoors, not funnel them inside for the artificial amusements of a big box water park.

Most important to many opponents of the project is its potential impact on Tahoe and its famously blue water. The bi-

state Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) weighed in with a comment letter, pointing out that impacts from the development would “reach and extend into the Tahoe Region.”

Of particular concern to TRPA is the amount of traffic Squaw Valley development would pump into the Tahoe basin. That traffic – and the pollution it would generate – would lead directly to loss in lake clarity.

Their concerns are shared by regional conservation groups and, also, local businesses. More than 50 signed on to a joint letter to Placer County, urging officials “to reject KSL’s proposed development and, instead, encourage landowners and the community to work together to create a blueprint that makes sense for Squaw, Tahoe, and beyond.”

But, in spite of the clear consensus of opposition to the plan, the latest revision included no substantive changes – and continues to move through the planning process.

Next, Placer County will release the final environmental impact report for the project – the final written assessment of what proposed development would mean to Squaw Valley, to Tahoe, and beyond. The public will have 30 days to digest that document. Then the county will hold public hearings – with a vote on the project coming as early as this summer.

Conservationists plan on rallying more support for their campaign to Keep Squaw True.

This isn’t the first time Tahoe has been threatened by wild development schemes. Fifty years ago, our parents and grandparents worked together to protect the lake from a plan to ring the lake with freeways and urbanization. Now it’s our turn.

Tom Mooers is executive director of Sierra Watch, the conservation nonprofit spearheading a campaign to Keep Squaw True.

