

Commissioners OK Squaw Valley mega project



The two sides of the proposed development at Squaw Valley's village. Photos/LTN

By Kathryn Reed

KINGS BEACH – On eight 4-2 votes, the Placer County Planning Commission on Thursday approved several items pertaining to the future of Squaw Valley.

KSL, which has owned Squaw since 2010, wants do what former Squaw Valley Village owner Intrawest did not do; complete the four-phase project. But this would be on a grander scale.

While the 1983 Squaw Valley General Plan allows for 4,200 bedrooms in Olympic Valley, the plan being proposed has 1,493

bedrooms. This includes 35 cabins (developer's description) (time share mansions is opponents' description) in Shirley Canyon – an area currently not developed.

“We would like to restore Squaw Valley-Alpine to a pre-eminent destination,” Andy Wirth, CEO of Squaw Valley, said. “There is a substantial deficit in the vacation experience in terms of the quality of lodging and variety.”

After nine hours, which included comments from nearly 100 people, the commissioners spent the next hour asking staff clarifying questions before they voted.

Commissioner Richard Johnson asked about issues in the 15-page letter Attorney General Kamala Harris sent on Tuesday.

Chief Deputy County Counsel Valerie Flood said, “I don't see anything in the letter that would prevent us from going forward.” She said Harris didn't say anything that others hadn't already said.

(It is unusual for an AG to weigh in on an EIR.)

Harris wrote, “... the FEIR should be revised and recirculated to adequately address the project's (green house gas) impacts and potential impacts to Lake Tahoe. Climate change is a critical issue for California and Lake Tahoe is a national, state, and local treasure and the county should not disregard impacts in these areas in reviewing the project. More information is needed to fully understand what the project's impacts will be on greenhouse gas emissions and on Lake Tahoe.”



Immediately after the Aug. 11 vote, Squaw CEO Andy Wirth, left, went to speak with Commissioner Wayne Nader, who voted no. Photo/LTN

Voting no were commissioners Wayne Nader and Mickey Gray. Gray represents the district where the project resides. Commissioner Fred Arcuri was absent.

The main decisions the commissioners had to make were whether to certify the final environmental impact report, approve the specific plan, amend the Squaw Valley General Plan, approve the development agreement and OK the water assessment.

Traffic was a main topic for the opponents – the level of service and the lack of analysis in regards to other proposed projects inside and outside the basin. (Squaw Valley is not in the Tahoe basin.)

Harris wrote, “Because of the proximity-of the proposed development to Lake Tahoe, we are concerned about the impacts the development will have within the Tahoe basin. We are particularly concerned with the project’s resulting increases

in vehicular use and traffic within the basin.”

The EIR for the most part ignored Lake Tahoe.

Harris’ letter was one of more than 300 that were submitted.

This is not the end of the road for Squaw Valley Real Estate, the applicant and a subsidiary of resort owners KSL. The Board of Supervisors will have the final say regarding the potential billion-dollar, 25-year project. The supes are likely to hear the project proposal this fall.

The vote on Aug. 11 came after the **Squaw Valley Municipal Advisory Council** voted no in May.



More than 400 people turned out for the Squaw hearing, even though the capacity sign said 268. Photo/LTN

Proponents say it’s necessary to offer year-round activities as well as something to do for non-skiers and for when the weather isn’t ideal. Opponents say the natural surroundings should be good enough.

Squaw is not unique in wanting to be more than a ski resort. Being a year-round destination and a self-contained playground is more profitable than a one-season business. Opponents don’t want resort owners to make a buck while sacrificing what the community is today.

It's not that all opponents are satisfied with the status quo; many said they were open to improvements, but on a much smaller scale.

Wirth described the base of the mountain as being an 82-acre parking lot; in other words, it's being wasted.

The plan includes a controversial mountain adventure center. Some call it a 90,000-square-foot indoor water park, others call it an athlete's training facility. At the meeting a Squaw representative said it would be both and then some, with the final components decided as the resort gets closer to actually putting something in the ground.

A simulation was shown of what the buildings will look like as one drives up Squaw Valley Road from Highway 89. Six of them will be 96-feet tall, or eight stories.

About 400 people turned out for the daylong hearing – many showing their colors. Purple vs. white. If only it were that simple, the purple would have won by sheer numbers. They were the ones representing "Keep Tahoe True". Those in white were about "Squaw Tomorrow". The colors are strategic – purple and white have long been the colors of this resort.

The opposition was set out in front of the North Tahoe Event Center with signs, shirts and bumper stickers. Proponents were inside the lobby with large posters promoting the benefits. In the hearing room people held up signs saying "Deny this project" and "Listen to the community".

Of the 98 people who spoke, 58 were against the project, while 40 were for it.

Most of those who spoke in favor of the project worked for Alpine or Squaw Valley, or somehow financially benefit from the resorts.

Water, traffic and affordable housing were the overriding

concerns of opponents. The resort believes the water supply will be adequate even though data is based on wells yet to be drilled. Traffic is already an issue, as underlined by a captain with the California Highway Patrol. While commissioners touched on this, gridlock was not enough to derail the project. As for housing, 300 units will be built for people who work at the resort – some of which will be dormitory style.