

Northstar master plan changes approved

By Jessie Marchesseau

Housing for workers and traffic were two of the main concerns of Placer County planning commissioners on Feb. 2 as they discussed amendments to Northstar's master plan.

The 20-year Northstar Mountain Master Plan includes the following key points:

- 5 new lifts
- A gondola from the lower parking lots
- 25 new ski trails on approximately 175 acres
- 400 acres of new tree skiing
- Widening of existing ski trails
- Additional snowmaking on 13 existing trails and 12 of the proposed trails
- 3 new lodges/warming huts
- Relocating the cross country center
- Expanding the existing Summit Deck and Grille
- A long-term forest fuels reduction and timber harvest plan
- A habitat management plan including resource protection, seasonal wildlife closures, forest management, invasive weed management and more.

A lengthy presentation explained the above plans and Northstar's desire to make a better experience for resort

visitors through expanding terrain and services. There was no mention of the Forest Flyer roller coaster discussed in the past, nor any mention of other summertime services.

Allen Breuch, supervising planner with Placer County, introduced the agenda item and the Northstar representatives in attendance. Breuch gave a recap of the plan, reminding the commission that it came before the planning commission in 2012 and the final EIR has been completed.

Only a very small portion of the improvements would be located within the Tahoe basin, and those would be subject to Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approval.

Northstar representatives noted there will be significant unavoidable impacts. Adding new trails and lifts will have a visual impact from Highway 267. There would also be air quality impacts during construction.

Northstar estimates the expansion will require hiring about 110 new full-time employees who would then need a place to live. Northstar intends to create employee housing to accommodate 75 percent of those employees, though there are no specifics yet on how they would accomplish it.

Commissioners noted that housing is a hot issue right now, in short supply and high demand. They stressed how important it would be for Northstar to carry through on that part of the plan.

The commissioners also expressed concern about parking and traffic issues. On recent weekends, cars trying to enter Northstar have been backed up all the way to Interstate 80. Commissioner Larry Severson said he was worried this might give a bad name not only to Northstar, but to the Tahoe ski industry as a whole.

The congestion doesn't hold up just skiers, but locals trying to travel from Truckee to Kings Beach as well, he said.

Northstar representatives skirted the issue without giving any real answer or solution. The master plan was designed to reduce crowding on the ski hill by adding new runs, but does nothing to address the parking problem. The resort will be adding only 20 parking spaces, and those will be at the new cross country ski center location.

Northstar General Manager Nadia Guerriero explained the master plan will “improve guest and employee experiences ... with on-mountain, recreational and skier improvements.” She added that it does not include real estate or parking expansion.

With the master plan and EIR already submitted, Northstar was before the commission with a handful of specific items.

The requests brought before the commission were:

- An amendment to relocate an existing tourist/resort commercial land use area.
- Rezone two existing forestry zone areas so one would align with the relocated Martis Valley Community Plan land use designation square, and the other adjusted to a “more suitable location” for development of campsites.
- A zoning text amendment to Placer County Code amending the definition of “ski lift facilities” and “ski runs” and Timberland Production Zone to allow for the development of ski lift facilities and ski runs as a conditionally permitted use within land boundaries owned and/or operated by existing ski resorts within TPZ land located outside the Tahoe basin.
- Approval of a conditional use permit to allow the Northstar Mountain Master Plan which would guide development of the resort over a projected 20-year period.

When the floor opened to public comment, eight people stepped up to offer their opinion. Of those, two expressed concerns about the plan, one about the parking and traffic issue, the

other about the soundness of the EIR. The other six commenters were in full support of the plan and the requested changes.

Breuch assured commissioners the EIR was done correctly.

Commissioners approved all requests unanimously.

The commission also approved the extension of a special use permit for the timeshare project at 215 Anderson Road and 6731 North Lake Blvd. in Tahoe Vista. According to representatives on behalf of PFK Development Group, financing issues delayed the project, but the company is ready to move forward with demolishing the existing buildings this summer. Two community members spoke up from the Tahoe City office with complaints about the current condition of the property including trash, severe dilapidation and wild animals. The commission voted to grant the extension with a condition that demolition of existing structures will begin during the 2017 building season.

The Feb. 2 Placer County Planning Commission meeting was in Auburn, though both items on the consent agenda concerned properties located in the Tahoe-Truckee area. Tahoe residents wishing to give input without traveling to Auburn were invited to attend the meeting via interactive video at the Placer County Administrative Offices in Tahoe City.