

Squaw-Alpine gondola could be transformative



Troy Caldwell, left, listens to Squaw Valley CEO Andy Wirth talk about the proposed California Express gondola. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VALLEY – Eighty years after Wayne Paulson envisioned linking Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows ski resorts, his dream may become a reality.

The founder of Squaw thought he could realize it in his lifetime. Not so. But those falling in his footsteps are now the closest to bringing this to fruition.

The U.S. Forest Service and Placer County are in the throes of the environmental review process. All of the scientists have

done their field work. The draft environmental impact statement and draft environmental impact report are being written. They should be released for a 30-day comment period in the first quarter of 2018.

Various routes are being studied, though the exact number has not been released.

The earliest the gondola could be in the ground would be for the 2019-20 season. It will take about 10 months to build.

For years Troy Caldwell has been one of the hurdles that could never be jumped. Now he is on board. He owns the swath of land between the resorts where stanchions for the gondola would have to be placed. He also owns the land KT-22 is on.

Why the change of heart?

He told *Lake Tahoe News* the ownership changes in the resorts with both now being under the KSL umbrella gave him the confidence it would work in all respects.

"I make a rent check on the gondola going through," Caldwell added.



Olympian Jonny Moseley, an ambassador for Squaw Valley, on Nov. 25 talked about how the gondola will be a good thing for both resorts. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

Caldwell, along with Squaw Valley Alpine Meadows CEO Andy Wirth, spoke Nov. 25 to a group of about 50 people at Squaw. Based on the questions most seemed to support the concept.

Some were concerned about bringing more people to both mountains. Increased skier visits is not the goal of the \$25 million gondola.

“It’s to stay competitive,” Wirth said. This type of infrastructure is becoming the norm in other parts of North America.

The gondola would be similar to what has been done in Utah linking Park City to the Canyons area, as well as at Whistler-Blackcomb in British Columbia.

That is also why a peak-to-peak gondola is not being talked about. That would not solve congestion on the highway or get people to where they really want to go.

A significant number of skiers ride Squaw and Alpine in a single day. To do so requires driving or being bused between them. The gondola would make it so car keys are not part of the equation.

“About 20 percent on a Saturday ski both,” Wirth said, explaining that number is in large part ski team members/parents going back and forth. Getting them and others off the road would remove 18 tons of carbon a year, he said.

The gondola would take 1,400 riders per hour. This compares to a high-speed chairlift that maxes out at about 2,300 riders, and the funitel at Squaw that loads 4,000 people an hour.

“It’s probably one of the single most iconic lifts in California’s history,” Wirth said. That’s why the eight-seat gondola (maybe 10) is going to be called the California Express. It will take people from the base of one resort to the other in about 13 minutes.



Dozens of people get an update Nov. 25 on the Squaw-Alpine gondola proposal. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

One of the biggest concerns people have had since the gondola resurfaced as a viable entity is how it might impact Granite Chief Wilderness Area. Wilderness areas by federal law cannot have any mechanized contraptions (not even a bicycle) in them.

Wirth said everyone involved is cognizant of not wanting to impact the area, and are aware the Sierra Nevada yellow-legged frog has habitat in the region. The gondola cannot and will not be in the wilderness area.

This land is most often used by the public in the summer. That is one reason resort officials and Caldwell are essentially putting it in indelible ink that the gondola will only operate when the resorts are open for skiing – never in the summer.

Creating more skiable terrain is also not an incentive to build the gondola. However, depending on the route that is selected it may be possible to let people out mid-mountain to ski at one or both resorts. This slowing of a gondola would be similar to what Heavenly Mountain Resort has where people can get off at the mid-station to sightsee before going up to the actual mountain.

Another significant issue is wind. Monitors have been placed at varying locations to clock speeds. This will play into what eventually is decided as the preferred alternative.

Admittedly the base of Squaw is already congested. One of the options being talked about would remove Red Dog and put the new gondola there. Wirth said the Squaw terminus will be at or between Red Dog and Cushing Meadow. Wirth said to expect Red Dog to be replaced in the next two years.

At Alpine, the gondola is likely to go between Hot Wheels and Summit chairlifts.

An issue at Alpine is that there is a 22-foot incline to most of the lifts. The goal is to have the gondola on grade so it's not cumbersome to get to.

Improvements beyond the gondola are slated for Alpine, too. This includes replacing Hot Wheels next summer, most likely with a six-speed lift with a possible angled station that would go to the top of Sherwood.

The EIR/EIS will give the public the opportunity to weigh-in on the gondola – positively or negatively, or just raise questions. It will ultimately be up to the feds and county to approve the project.