

# Proposed Squaw-Alpine gondola raises concerns about environmental threats, avalanche devices

By Kathryn Reed

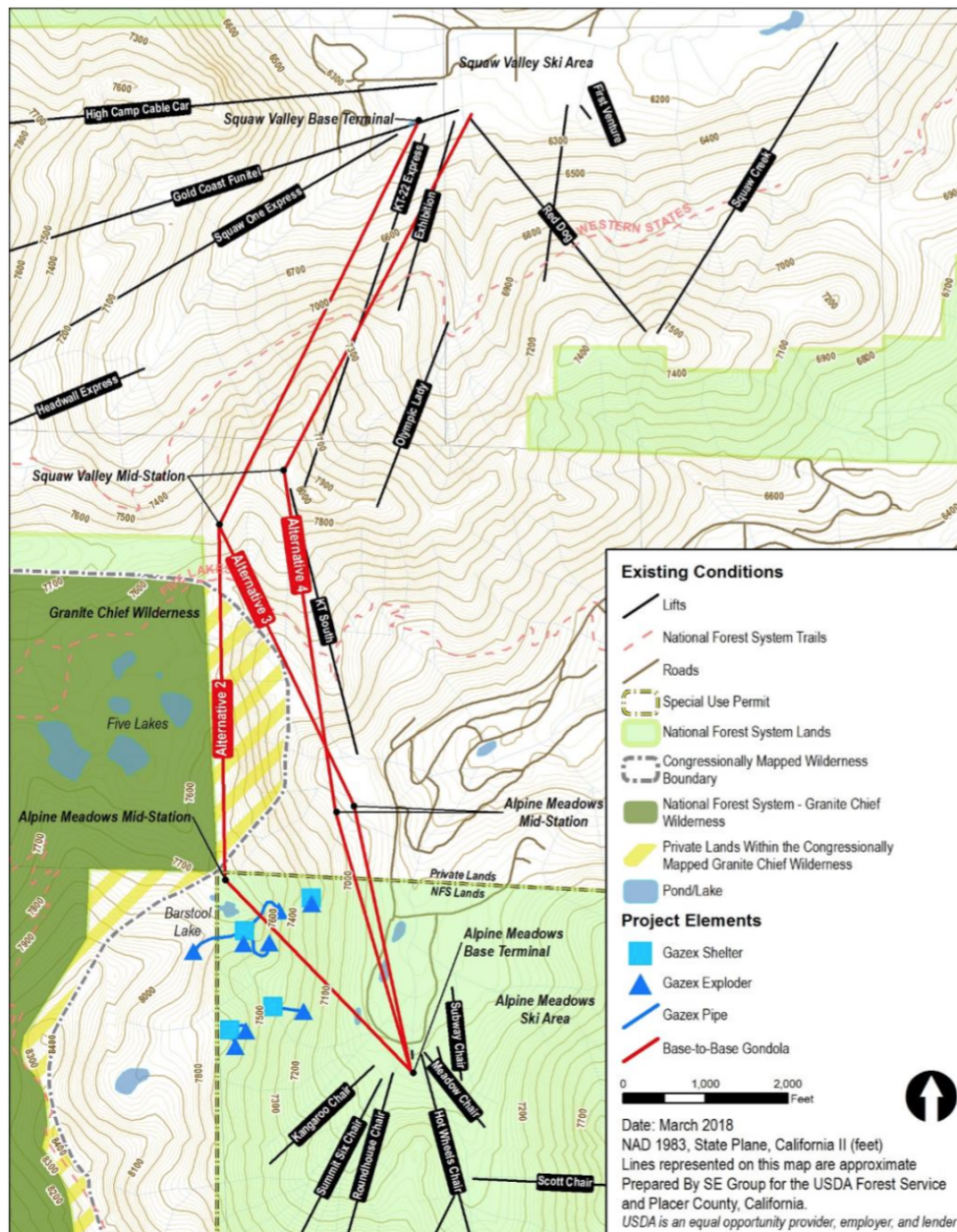
KINGS BEACH – While the proximity to Granite Chief Wilderness Area has been a dominate argument for not building the gondola that would link Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows ski resorts, on Thursday neighbors raised the issue of the proposed avalanche control devices as another concern.

Heather Beckman, senior planner for Placer County, acknowledged at the end of the public comment that the Gazex devices have emerged as an issue.

“It’s definitely something we will be researching and addressing in the final document,” Beckman told the county Planning Commission.

Commissioners on May 24 received an update on the project and took public comment. This was Commissioner Anders Hauge’s first meeting, having been sworn in that day.

Placer County and the U.S. Forest Service (Tahoe National Forest) have the final say over approving the project. Together they have released the EIR and EIS.



**Figure 1: Gondola alternatives; land ownership and designations**

Red lines are possible gondola routes from Squaw (top) to Alpine (bottom). Source: Placer County

The eight-person gondola would link the base areas of the two resorts, taking 1,400 passengers an hour in each direction. The ride would take 16 minutes.

Beckman said it will not open new terrain, but will provide better access to some terrain. It will be possible to load/unload at the midstation. The gondola would only be operational during the ski season.

Beckman said the gondola is expected to have a mild impact on skier visits the first year; with a projected increase of 1.4 percent or 12,400 skier visits the first year, then tapering off by year five.

This, according to the county, could equate to an increase of 422 vehicle trips, which will impact Highway 89 the most and the left turn lane onto Alpine Meadows Road.

The ski resort owner wants alternative 2, which is the closest to the Granite Chief Wilderness Area. Alternatives 3 and 4 are farther away and would have fewer environmental impacts.

Nine people spoke during the meeting at North Tahoe Event Center, with most having concerns about the proposed project.

Craig Hamilton lives on Alpine Meadows Road, which is prone to avalanches. The resort is now using Gazex devices to manage that area.

“The shockwave force feels like the house has been hit by a bomb,” Hamilton said. He called it a “terrifying event.”

While he said he loves the idea of the gondola, he and others don't like the Gazex machines that are already visible from the **5 Lakes Trail**. The trail is in the wilderness area, while the machines are not. A wilderness area by definition is not open to machinery, not even mountain bikes are allowed in these federal lands.

A representative from Sierra Watch said his group's main concerns center on the gondola's proximity to the wilderness area, the impact on wildlife – the endangered yellow-legged frog that has been found at Barstool Lake, and intensification of development. The latter is a concern in terms congestion on Highway 89 and the roads leading to the resorts, as well as the plans Troy Caldwell has with his 460-acres.

Part of the gondola infrastructure would be on Caldwell's

property. He has talked about developing some of his land and tying it into one of the midway stations of the gondola.

That is why some people want the powers that be to look at cumulative effects of projects and not each one in a silo.

Ron Cohen, deputy general counsel for Alterra Mountain Company who is also interim COO at Squaw Valley Ski Holdings, was the lone voice in support of the gondola. Alterra is now the parent company of Squaw and Alpine.

“We are trying to address the issues raised by the project,” Cohen told the commissioners. He said his people are working with the environmental community, adding that the company cares about the wilderness area and the endangered yellow-legged frog.

The commissioners had no comments.

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**Notes:**

- The environmental document is available **online**.
- The deadline to comment is June 11 at 5pm.