

Tahoe faces new development battle: green vs. green

December 3 2009, By Tom Knudson

As snow begins to blanket Lake Tahoe, the region finds itself facing a new kind of development battle: green vs. green.

On a ridge overlooking a sparkling, silver-blue bay, Roger Wittenberg has a dream. An inventor and developer, he wants to tear down the cavernous old Tahoe Biltmore Lodge & Casino and replace it with a \$140 million eco-friendly resort he says will work environmental miracles by shrinking carbon emissions and reducing the flow of sediment into the lake.

The resort, he added, also will emphasize health, nutrition and nature over gambling -- although it would include a small casino.

"We have the opportunity to make the next quantum leap forward," Wittenberg said. "We would like to be that project that (shows) us we can enjoy the lake without harming the lake."

Some environmentalists, who have waged battles against development at [Lake Tahoe](#) for decades, and a handful of residents are wary. The proposed Boulder Bay Resort & Wellness Center, they say, will bring even more traffic and pollution to narrow State Route 28 and the dated strip development around Crystal Bay and could even spark a new wave of urbanization.

"We are in a very difficult situation here," said Rochelle Nason, executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe, at a hearing before

the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency last week.

"You might say: There's a lot of good here," Nason said. "But then the question arises: If we get a lot of good from this hotel, how many hotels are we going to need? What is the rest of the picture?"

Tension is high because tourist-dependent Lake Tahoe -- home to some of the toughest environmental laws in the nation -- is losing business to other resort destinations. On the north side of the lake, where Boulder Bay would be located, support is strong.

One backer is Art Chapman, president of JMA Ventures LLC, which owns nearby Alpine Meadows and Homewood ski areas.

"I think we are really at a tipping point up here," Chapman said. "If we can't as a community support good, sustainable, proper, smart redevelopment of old areas, then what do we support?"

If successful, the Boulder Bay project would dramatically transform the tiny, pine-dotted community of Crystal Bay, where the historic Tahoe Biltmore -- with its iconic giant wagon wheel sign out front -- has stood for 63 years.

Not only would the Biltmore's casino and hotel rooms be demolished, asphalt parking lots and outbuildings would vanish, too. On the 16-acre site, a new 300-room hotel would rise, along with 59 condominiums, a health and wellness center, 20,000 square feet of shops and restaurants and a much smaller casino.

Wittenberg, who bought the Biltmore in 2007, describes the project as a model of environmental sensitivity. Snowmelt would be captured to irrigate landscaping and flush toilets. Compact fluorescent lights and tankless water heaters would shrink energy use.

Recycled products would be used throughout the facility, including exterior decking made from plastic bags and sawdust -- a product called TREX that Wittenberg invented -- and his own brand of insulation made from scrap paper and cardboard. The roofs of some buildings would be seeded with native grasses to better absorb and filter water.

Perhaps most important, he plans to build an underground water treatment facility to dramatically reduce erosion into the lake.

"Roger knows what he's doing," said Bob Maxson, president of Sierra Nevada College in Incline Village. "I don't know of a person in this community or this state that knows more about the environment (and) about how to protect that environment."

Project faces uphill climb

A draft environmental impact statement for the project was released by the regional planning agency earlier this month, but its board is not expected to make a decision until early next year.

Planning agency spokesman Dennis Oliver said the project meshes with its program to protect Lake Tahoe by focusing more attention on the redevelopment of aging urban areas, which contribute much of the fine sediment that threatens lake clarity.

"The vast majority of development you see out there was done wrong," Oliver said. "We've got to the stage now where we've got to go back and fix what we've done."

That means reaching out to green-minded developers, Oliver added, saying the agency actually invited Wittenberg to submit a project proposal.

At the public hearing in Incline Village last week, 32 people spoke in favor of the project, while fewer than half a dozen opposed it.

"I've been in the ski industry for over 30 years and ... I don't think I've ever seen so much sensitivity and thoughtfulness and intellect put into a project," said Chris Ryman, president of Northstar at Tahoe, a nearby ski area.

"The existing Tahoe Biltmore is tired and dysfunctional," said Steve Teshara, executive director of the North Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce. "To do nothing would be the worst alternative."

Even if Boulder Bay gets the go-ahead, it could still face an uphill climb.

Over the past year and a half, the League to Save Lake Tahoe has sued to stop two projects previously approved by TRPA -- Sandy Beach, a timeshare resort at Tahoe Vista, and Sierra Colina Village, a South Lake Tahoe subdivision that Oliver said includes 10 acres of open space, stream restoration and sediment control projects, bike trails and green-certified design and construction.

The Sandy Beach permit was suspended by TRPA amid controversy before the lawsuit; the Sierra Colina case is in court.

"Those two (projects) have been egregious examples of development projects getting a pass on the rules that apply to everybody else in the Tahoe basin," said Nason.

Oliver believes deeper currents are swirling. "A lot of these conflicts and lawsuits are about the environmentalists wishing the world were different," he said. "They want their reality to dictate policy." And, he added, "Their fundraising depends on conflict."

In a September speech to the California chapter of the American Planning Association, the planning agency's executive director, Joanne Marchetta, called environmental opposition to redevelopment the biggest obstacle to environmental progress at Tahoe.

"Those who believe that private development ruined Tahoe 30 years ago want to put the brakes on using revitalization to drive environmental improvements," Marchetta said, according to a copy of her speech obtained by The Sacramento Bee.

"Honestly, this impasse is the greatest obstacle to environmental good here in Tahoe, a greater obstacle even than bad development," Marchetta said.

Laurel Ames, the league's former executive director, said TRPA deserves the criticism. "It's just one big development after the next," she said. "TRPA is hellbent on getting every last bit of private property built out within the next 20 years."

At the Boulder Bay public hearing, critics took aim at the project's location, on the north side of the highway with no beach access and several miles from most ski areas.

"When visitors come to Lake Tahoe, they want to touch, feel and see the area," said Derrek Aaron, a consultant from nearby Incline Village. "They are not going to sit around a resort. This means an incredible amount of traffic and pollution."

Others said the project was simply too big.

Margaret Martini, who lives in Incline Village, questioned its ability to attract tourists during a recession. "You can put up the Taj Mahal at Lake Tahoe, and (people) are still not going to be able to afford to travel

to it," she said.

Nason, the League to Save Lake Tahoe's executive director, was among the last to speak. "A lot of people have obviously made up their minds already," she told the board. "The league has not."

Then she ticked off a list of issues, including her concern that the project is being considered without conforming to a community plan for the area.

"When it comes to redevelopment, we have a pretty high standard here in the basin," she said. "Somewhere in between a project that is better than nothing and a perfect project, there is a project that people can get behind."

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Citation: Tahoe faces new development battle: green vs. green (2009, December 3) retrieved 5 July 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-12-tahoe-green.html>

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