

Viewpoints: Mega-resort could harm Tahoe

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Some 40 years ago, the Perini Corp., a major national builder headquartered in Massachusetts, purchased the Chambers Landing resort on Tahoe's west shore.

"Lake Tahoe is a place of unmatched beauty," John Perini told neighboring homeowners, "We intend to develop Chambers Landing into a premier resort."

Tahoe's west shore, located in Placer County, consists of single-family homes and extends about 15 miles south from Tahoe City to Rubicon Bay. Perini bought 700 acres zoned prime recreational and residential, and a half-interest in what is now the Homewood ski area.

Perini's initial plan included six nine-story high-rises. "By building up instead of across," Perini told the homeowners "the trees can be saved and we can keep Chambers green." Homeowner objections forced Perini to scale back its development to 43 condos.

Today, the green of the dollar is once again threatening the blue of Lake Tahoe's environmental and scenic qualities. JMA Ventures of San Francisco seeks a massive expansion of the Homewood ski area. About a half-mile north of Chambers Landing, JMA proposes building a high-rise ski lodge, 405 condos and transient accommodations and a commercial center; halfway up the mountain the developer proposes a clubhouse for condo owners and hotel guests, a swimming pool and a 14,000-square-foot restaurant.

This invasive development is the largest in the 40-year history of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. The project threatens water runoff from the Mount Ellis watershed. It also threatens to urbanize the west shore, increase traffic congestion and remove trees. The families who ski on runs that visually lead to the lake will, in the future, ski down to an asphalt base, with a proposed lodge far above existing height limits, and 28 acres of condominiums.

Like John Perini, JMA President Art Chapman seeks to exploit the marketing potential of Tahoe's spectacular beauty. A savvy developer, Chapman surely checked out the feasibility of getting the necessary approval before proceeding with his proposal.

Friends of the West Shore, the League to Save Lake Tahoe and conservationists are deeply troubled by the scope of the project. But their anger is justifiably focused on the TRPA.

These groups point to a statement issued by Joanne Marchetta, executive director of TRPA, titled, "The Cost of Doing Nothing Too High for Tahoe," an attempt to balance environmental protection with development. "We must accept," Marchetta writes, "that the days are over when environmental protection meant simply saying 'no' to all development. This means moving forward with restoration work, replacing poorly conceived development and realizing economic gains from redevelopment."

The suggestion that environmentalists oppose all major development is a complete distortion. As Rochelle Nason, executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe, points out, in recent years the League supported the Embassy Suites in South Lake Tahoe, a timeshare resort at the foot of

the Heavenly ski run, and the gondola from the South Shore hotels to Heavenly for traffic reduction.

With the lake's clarity stabilized at 69 feet deep, it may be possible to build on some sensitive parcels, but that's a far stretch from the TRPA lauding the massive Homewood remodel as a green development or suggest that a development like Homewood can be viewed as a symbol of commerce and culture.

The proposed TRPA policy is an insult to the millions of California voters who, in 1982, approved an \$85 million bond issue to compensate Tahoe property owners for the loss of environmentally sensitive parcels on which construction had been restricted by the TRPA.

To label the Homewood ski area a redevelopment project and to offer incentives to a developer who stands to make millions for complying with environmental standards that are simply good public policy is as offensive as allowing a homeowner to mitigate the environmental damage created by construction. By its density alone, the out-of-scale Homewood "redevelopment" contradicts sound planning and accepted policy that mandates environmental protection.

While the TRPA appears prepared to approve "green" development, the agency is two years late in updating its five-year plan. That update would give the public a chance to review policy.

In 1982, the voters were told that Tahoe is a scenic treasure that serves all Californians. The TRPA is obviously more concerned about a select few.

"The cost of doing nothing is too high" is obfuscating rhetoric. Tahoe's scenic and environmental values must be protected. The TRPA needs new leadership.

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