

# A Valley Divided

Written by Tanya Canino



Olympic Valley, photo courtesy Squaw Valley Resort, photo by Keoki Flagg

**AT A TYPICAL** Tuesday night Bluesday concert, a local strolling through the crowded Village at Squaw Valley will encounter longtime friends, ski buddies and post office acquaintances in a camaraderie cultivated through a shared love of the mountain. They are drawn to Village events *almost* like they are drawn to KT on a bluebird powder day.

The peaks of Squaw Valley Ski Resort—Squaw, Emigrant and Granite Chief—lord over the scene, having stood constant over the small, forest-walled valley long before Wayne Poulsen introduced the Sierra gem to East Coast entrepreneur Alex Cushing in 1946. Cushing built the ski resort to host the 1960 Winter Olympics, forever cloaking the valley in fame.

Today, a large development proposal

and an incorporation effort are tearing apart the valley's close-knit residents, as factions maneuver to protect what each considers Olympic Valley's legacy.

Since 2010, under a new ownership led by CEO Andy Wirth, Squaw Valley Ski Holdings (SVSH) invested \$50 million to improve the resort experience, purchased Alpine Meadows Ski Area and announced plans to build a large, destination resort at the Village at Squaw Valley.

With the proposal, SVSH came head-to-head with local opposition.

"In the 50-something years of Squaw Valley's existence, it's never been a destination resort. People don't fly over the Rockies and the Wasatch," says Jon Shanser, one of the founders of Friends of Squaw Valley, formed to watchdog development plans.

The history and legacy of Squaw Valley requires an upgrade to lure the destination visitor to the Olympic resort, Wirth argued at a July Placer County Board of Supervisors workshop in the Village.

"We think that the 82 acres of parking lot can be something more. Acres and acres of parking lot is not the soul and spirit of this place," Wirth said.

Since Squaw proposed the plan in December 2011, a debate has ignited over what should be the character of Squaw Valley.

Incorporate Olympic Valley (IOV) hopes to gain local control through creating a city. Save Olympic Valley (SOV), funded with more than \$200,000 from Squaw, formed as the cheerleader for the resort's past and future accomplishments. Friends of Squaw Valley, assisted by Sierra Watch,

favor continued downsizing of the project.

“We kept harping on them that what they are planning is too big,” Shanser says.

In response to thousands of comments, 300 community meetings and county staff input, resort management rolled out a revision in January 2014.

“Those revisions are trending in one direction—to reduce the scale and scope of the project,” says Alex Fisch, the county’s manager for the project application.

This latest iteration of the Village at Squaw Valley project is proposed for 93.7 acres, 1,493 bedrooms in 850 units, housing for 300 employees, recreation enhancements to valley trails and parks, \$1.5 million in environmental improvements to Squaw Creek, and over 297,000 of commercial square feet, which includes retail shops and restaurants, skier services such as rental shops and ski schools, transit facilities, hotel common areas and meeting space, and the 90,000 square foot Mountain Adventure Camp, a recreation area with indoor and outdoor water features.

“We told people we were listening, and we wanted to prove that we were listening,” Wirth says.

He said the key changes were: 1. Keeping the members locker room in place; 2. Substantially decreasing the lodging density; 3. Reorganizing to keep the open air parking lots close.

The project is 50 percent of the original proposal and has addressed 90 percent of the reasons why the initial plan was rejected, says Chevis Hosea, SVSH vice president of development. “We are working to resolve the remaining issues of the plan,” he says, adding that he hopes the application can be approved next year.

A draft Environmental Impact Statement, including the project’s phasing, will be submitted this fall and public comment will be solicited in December or January. The county will also study the fiscal impact

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Village at Squaw Valley, photo courtesy Squaw Valley Resort

of providing service to increased visitors and the economic impact on competing Tahoe-Truckee resorts, Fisch says.

While SVSH is seeking permission to build, actual construction would be phased over 20 years, subject to the consumer market, Wirth says.

The Friends of Squaw Valley are still looking for less, such as reducing the number of rooms and lowering the heights of the buildings, Shanser says. “We’re in a watchful, waiting mode right now.”

With project decisions in Placer County’s hands, the effort to incorporate Olympic Valley marches forward. IOV paid \$51,750 in September to the Placer County Local Agency Formation Commission (LAFCO) which will task a consultant to put together a comprehensive fiscal analysis of whether a valley town is financially feasible while keeping the impact to the county revenue neutral, says Kris Berry, LAFCO director. The analysis should take three to four months, after which time there will be a public hearing

and the LAFCO board will decide whether to send the issue to a vote.

If the answer is yes, Olympic Valley’s 564 registered voters will decide whether to incorporate.

The incorporation effort began when residents became concerned by the enormity of the initial Village project application, says Fred Ilfeld, an IOV founder who emphasizes that the group is no longer anti-development.

“Our focus is on having local decision-making,” he says. “The town’s fiscal well-being is highly dependent on the fiscal well-being of the commercial entities in the valley.”

In June, IOV members met with Wirth to talk about mutual benefits of incorporation: self determination, retaining more tax dollars, local representation, second homeowner voices on town committees and grant potential. Ilfeld wouldn’t say what occurred in the meeting, only that Squaw is still very much anti-incorporation.

“We are gravely concerned about the

amount of risk involved,” Wirth says. “We are one voice of many against incorporation.”

Large lodging suppliers, such as Resort at Squaw Creek, as well as Eric Poulsen, a member of the valley’s founding family, asked if the county could analyze an alternative boundary excluding them from cityhood.

Incorporation has long been a source of contention in the valley between residents, but is becoming even more controversial due to recent tactics such as anti-incorporation residents reporting IOV for inappropriately following campaign finance laws when soliciting money for the LAFCO study; Save Olympic Valley’s anti-city ads in local papers; unofficialAlpine.com exposing SOV as entirely funded by Squaw Valley Ski Holdings; Dr. Robb Gaffney publicly resigning from an “unofficial” ambassadorship for Squaw Valley; and Squaw Valley Ski Resort publishing a support letter from current Olympic athletes in the local newspaper.

“It has been divisive,” Shanser says.

Despite the animosity, the search for a happy medium continues. Hosea calls it a Goldilocks agreement—not too much, not too little. Wirth cautions that development must take place for Squaw Valley to be competitive. He cites that a dearth of quality lodging, as well as a 42 percent drop in in-bound airline capacity must be addressed—and Squaw Valley is working toward solutions in both realms.

The crux of the issue is how to expand into a destination resort without harming the character of a community birthed from the rich legacy of a mountain unparalleled in terrain and history—something even a Colorado CEO can appreciate.

“It’s one of the most incredible, spectacular valleys in the world,” Shanser says, adding that most everyone is for a “vibrant, expanded village,” the kind where a local can nosh with friends at a blues concert while dreaming of next season’s runs. **TQ**