and adoption of the Specific Plan and associated requested approvals would grant entitlements to build the Village at Squaw Valley as described in the EIR and commits the County to a course of action that would result in the need for a new fire station, which may be built off-site. Accordingly, the County must disclose and analyze the impacts of an off-site fire station now, to the extent feasible.

Third, the FEIR continues to underestimate the Project’s potential significant impacts to recreational resources, such as existing backcountry hiking trails, from bringing thousands of new visitors and residents to the Olympic Valley. See FEIR at 3.2.4-454 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-280). The County claims that because the Project would comply with the Placer County General Plan’s requirements for park space and other recreational opportunities, the Project would not cause substantial deterioration of existing recreational resources. FEIR at 3.2.4-547 (response no. 09-280). This is the sole basis for the EIR’s determination that the Project would not have a significant impact on recreational resources.

However, the General Plan’s recreational requirements cannot account for all of the Project’s demands on recreational resources. The scope of the General Plan’s requirements for recreational opportunities are tied to the number of new residents a new development would bring to the area—not the number of tourists and other recreational visitors that it would bring. See DEIR at 14-42. Accordingly, the General Plan’s requirements alone would not provide for the massive influx of non-resident visitors to the Olympic Valley that the Project promises. Further, unlike residents, who would only occasionally use recreational resources, tourists and visitors come to Squaw Valley solely to use recreational resources. This means that, on a per-capita basis, recreational visitors would have a greater impact on recreational resources than residents would. The EIR fails to explain how mere compliance with a County policy related to providing enough recreational resources for residents would somehow ensure that a massive influx of recreation-seeking visitors does not contribute to the deterioration of existing resources.

Compounding the Project’s impact on recreational resources is the fact that the Project would “provide enhanced access to existing public amenities” and develop “picnic areas, . . . signage, trailheads, and new restrooms,” making these resources easier to use and more attractive to users. See FEIR at 3.2.1-21 (response no. F2-2). But the EIR does not disclose the impacts of bringing more users to existing recreational resources like hiking trails. For example, the Granite Chief Trail—which has a trailhead in the Olympic Valley that the Project would develop with “parking, signage, and bike parking” (id.)—intersects with the Pacific Crest National Scenic Trail (“PCT”), (FEIR 3.2.1-9 (comment no. F2-3)). Commenting on the Project’s potential to drive up use of
existing trails, the Forest Service warned that “[i]ncreased use of the PCT may affect recreational experience as well as degrade the trail itself which is not designed for such heavy use” and expressed concern that “[t]he potential impacts to the PCT are not addressed anywhere in the [EIR].” Id.

Instead of analyzing the likely impacts that we and the Forest Service identified, the County attempts to downplay the Project’s impacts on recreational resources by responding that the improvements to the Granite Chief Trailhead “would be for the sole purpose of providing safer access for hikers currently using existing trails.” FEIR at 3.2.1-21 (response no. F2-3). Not only does this ignore the reality that better facilities would increase use, this directly contradicts the EIR’s explanation in the preceding paragraph that the plan to provide more parking and better signage at the Granite Chief Trailhead would be part of the Project’s development of “new and expanded public recreational facilities” to accommodate increased demand. FEIR at 3.2.1-21 (response no. F2-2). The County cannot have it both ways, simultaneously claiming that its improvements would provide sufficient recreational opportunities for a steep increase in visitors and asserting that those improvements would have no impact on existing trails like the PCT because they are merely intended to provide safer access for existing users.

Finally, the FEIR fails to correct the deficiencies we identified in the DEIR’s cumulative-impacts analysis for public services and utilities. See FEIR at 3.2.4-454 – 455 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-281). Instead, the County claims that “[b]ecause[] the project would fully mitigate its impacts on public services, a significant cumulative impact would not occur.” FEIR 3.2.4-547 (response no. 09-281). This is wrong for two reasons.

First, some of the Project’s contributions to cumulative impacts on public services and utilities would not be mitigated. Specifically, some of the Project’s impacts would be less than significant, and mitigation is not required for these small impacts. This is exactly why CEQA requires that an EIR analyze small impacts like these that may alone be insignificant but would contribute to larger, cumulative impacts. See CEQA Guidelines § 15355(b) (“Cumulative impacts can result from individually minor but collectively significant projects taking place over a period of time.”).

For example, the EIR explains that the development of residential and commercial space “could increase demand for sheriff/police protection” and “[e]mergency response times [to the area] could increase due to increased calls for service, especially during peak periods” but determines these impacts would be less than
significant. DEIR at 14-45. These are small but very real impacts, and this is exactly what a cumulative-impacts analysis is designed to account for—but the EIR ignores these impacts. The EIR should also explain whether the Project’s less-than-significant solid-waste generation impact might nonetheless contribute to a cumulatively significant impact on waste management in the area. See DEIR at 14-38. Likewise, the EIR should analyze the incremental contributions to cumulative impacts on recreational resources of the Project’s purportedly less-than-significant impact on hiking trails and other recreational resources. See DEIR at 14-42 – 43.

Next, the information in the EIR does not support the County’s claim that the Project would “fully mitigate” its impacts on public services and utilities. Mitigation measures need only to “minimize” significant impacts—not fully eliminate an impact. See CEQA Guidelines § 15126.4(a)(1). Accordingly, mitigated impacts may still contribute to cumulatively significant impacts. For example, the EIR concludes that its mitigation for impacts on wastewater collection “would reduce the potential impact to sewer capacity to a less-than-significant level.” DEIR at 14-37. But there would still be some impact to the regional sewer system, and the EIR must therefore analyze this incremental contribution to cumulative impacts, or provide evidence that the Project would make no such contribution at all. See CEQA Guidelines § 15355(b). The EIR must similarly analyze the Project’s contributions to cumulative impacts on fire and emergency services. See DEIR at 14-45.

13. The EIR Still Fails to Provide an Adequate Analysis of the Project’s Energy Efficiency.

The County also failed to correct deficiencies in the EIR’s energy-efficiency analysis. In our comment, we explained that the DEIR could not accurately evaluate the Project’s energy efficiency by comparing its proposed energy consumption to existing developments in the area because true energy efficiency can be determined only by comparing the Project’s energy demands to contemporary standards. FEIR at 3.2.4-455 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-284). In response, the County claims, perplexingly, that it need not make this comparison because “[t]he question, under CEQA, is whether a project would result in a wasteful or inefficient use of energy,” FEIR at 3.2.4-548 (response no. 09-284). Actually, under CEQA, the question is whether a project would result in “wasteful, inefficient, and unnecessary consumption of energy.” Cal. Clean Energy Comm. v. City of Woodland (2014) 225 Cal.App.4th 173, 209 (emphasis added); accord CEQA Guidelines, Appx. F(I); see also CEQA Guidelines § 15126.4(a)(1) (mitigation measures should be used to mitigate “inefficient and unnecessary consumption of energy”) (emphasis added). As we commented, the EIR
fails to provide sufficient information to determine whether the Project is energy efficient by today’s standards, which is essential to determining whether the Project would consume only the amount of energy necessary.

Further, the Project’s compliance with Title 24 Building Code energy efficiency-standards does not establish that the Project, if built, would be energy efficient. See Cal. Clean Energy, 225 Cal.App.4th at 211. While the Building Code addresses energy savings for buildings themselves, it does not include other relevant energy-efficiency considerations like “whether a building should be constructed at all, how large it should be, where it should be located, whether it should incorporate renewable energy resources, or anything else external to the building’s envelope.” Id.

The FEIR fails to adequately address comments relating to energy use associated with vehicular trips. We explained that the DEIR underestimated the extent of the Project’s transportation energy impacts because it relied on an inaccurate estimate of the Project’s vehicle miles traveled (“VMT”). FEIR at 3.2.4-456 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-286). The FEIR refers the reader to responses to comments 09-114 through 09-134 which in turn directs the reader to responses to letter 08-d. Id. at 3.2.4-549. Yet, the responses to letter 08-d seek to defend the faulty analysis in the DEIR. Consequently, the EIR continues to underestimate the Project’s trip generation and VMT. For example, as we explain above in Part I.B(3)(a), the EIR substantially underestimates the number of trips that would be generated by the indoor water park. Once the EIR is revised to include an accurate estimate of trips that would be generated by the water park, it must revise its VMT estimates, and its analysis of the Project’s transportation-related energy impacts.

We also commented that the EIR does not provide any discussion of appropriate renewable-energy options for the Project. FEIR at 3.2.4-456 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-288). The County responds that the proposed Specific Plan contains policies related to energy efficiency. FEIR at 3.2.4-550 (response no. 09-288). But these proposed policies merely “encourage” use of renewables and instruct that the Project applicant “explore” renewable options. DEIR at 14-26 – 27. First, these aspirational policies do not provide analysis of renewable-energy options that are actually viable for the Project, which is necessary for a good-faith analysis of the Project’s energy efficiency. Cal. Clean Energy, 225 Cal.App.4th at 213. Further, the EIR should not just “encourage” or direct “exploration of” use of renewables—for the Project to truly aim to meet Appendix F’s goal of “increasing reliance on renewable energy sources,” the EIR should require use of renewable energy to the extent feasible. See CEQA Guidelines Appx. F(I)(3).
The County also attempts to evade its obligation to provide a complete analysis of the Project's energy efficiency by claiming that specific analyses we requested were only suggested topics that Appendix F says "may" be discussed. See FEIR at 3.2.4-550 (response no. 09-289). That Appendix F does not require any particular discussion—instead listing topics that may be addressed as part of an EIR's energy-efficiency analysis—does not mean that the County is not obligated to make a good-faith effort to fully analyze whether the Project would result in an "inefficient, wasteful[, or] unnecessary consumption of energy." CEQA Guidelines, Appx. F(I); see also CEQA Guidelines § 15151 (requiring a "good faith effort at full disclosure"). Indeed, part of adequately informing the public and decision-makers about the Project's energy efficiency is to explain whether there are more energy-efficient methods for constructing the Project, as we indicated in our comment on the DEIR. See FEIR at 3.2.4-457 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-289). The EIR fails to do this.

The County's also brushes off our comment that the EIR erred in assuming that construction materials for the Project would be produced energy-efficiently. We pointed out the critical logical fallacy in the EIR's analysis, explaining that "[e]nergy-efficient and economically efficient are not always synonymous" because cheap and plentiful nonrenewable resources may encourage wasteful manufacturing. FEIR at 3.2.4-457 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-290). Not only does the County fail to correct that error, it takes the position that it need not make such an analysis because "[t]he applicant would not control the manufacturing process for materials used to construct the project." FEIR at 3.2.4-550 (response no. 09-290).

This excuse does not hold water. In almost no situation would the party constructing a building also manufacture the construction materials. However, the builder does control what materials it purchases, and the EIR can analyze the relative energy-efficiency of potential materials. Indeed, Appendix F contemplates just such an analysis. See CEQA Guidelines, Appx. F(II)(C)(1) ("If appropriate, the energy intensiveness of materials may be discussed.").

Finally, the FEIR fails to adequately address our comment that the DEIR did not conduct the required comparative evaluation of whether any Project alternative would result in more or less energy use. See FEIR at 3.2.4-457 (SMW letter, comment no. 09-291). The County responds that comparative energy consumption of the alternatives is discussed in Chapter 17 of the EIR. FEIR at 3.2.4-550 (response no. 09-291). It is not.
14. The EIR’s Cumulative Impacts Analysis Remains Inadequate.

The FEIR’s failure to adequately analyze the Project’s cumulative impacts is discussed throughout this letter and the firm’s letter on the DEIR in conjunction with each environmental issue area. However, the FEIR also fails to include, as requested by Sierra Watch and many other commenters, an adequate analysis of the Project’s impacts in conjunction with probable future and concurrent projects, such as the Martis Valley pipe (Project 60), the base-to-base gondola, and White Wolf. The response to comments points the reader to the Master Response regarding cumulative impacts. FEIR at 3.2.2-550 (response to comment nos. 09-294–09-295). However, the Master Response does not mention the Martis Valley pipe at all. It does claim that cumulative projects were limited to those under review before the “cut off” set by the County, which is the time of the NOP (here, February 2014). As noted in the firm’s comments on the DEIR, the Squaw Valley Public Services District proposed its water project (to deliver water from Martis to Squaw) as part of the Tahoe Sierra Integrated Water Management Plan in December 2013, before the alleged “cut off.” See FEIR at 3.2.4-345 (SMW comment letter, comment no. 09-17, and Exhibit 8 thereto).

The FEIR claims the base-to-base gondola and White Wolf did not meet the County’s “cut off” and therefore were not probable future projects under CEQA. As explained above (supra, Part I.A(2)) this argument is specious as the gondola is proposed by the same applicant as the Project and will be used to connect Squaw and Alpine, resorts under common ownership. Furthermore, the applicant has been in frequent communication with the owner of White Wolf over the gondola project and the proposed development at that site. See Exhibit 24 (Squaw Magazine article re Troy Caldwell). The EIR may not use a cut off date that clearly excludes known projects in the pipeline in the immediate vicinity of the Project.

The FEIR nevertheless attempts a brief analysis of the gondola (but not White Wolf). See FEIR at 3-64–365. This does not come close to meeting CEQA’s standards, as it neglects to even mention, much less analyze, many potential significant impacts. This includes impacts to biological, recreational, and visual resources from the placement of the gondola in a wilderness area that is home to the Sierra Nevada yellow

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23 As discussed (supra, Part I.A(2)), the gondola and Project 60 are so intertwined with the Project that they should have been analyzed as part of the Project. At a bare minimum, however, the EIR must analyze them as cumulative projects.
legged frog, as well as air quality and growth inducing impacts from the facilitation of more visitors to the area and the development at White Wolf. See Exhibit 25.

A revised and recirculated DEIR must thoroughly analyze the Project’s cumulative impacts in conjunction with the above referenced projects.

C. The FEIR Fails to Correct the Deficiencies in the DEIR’s Alternatives Analysis.

1. The FEIR Fails to Provide a Reasonable Range of Alternatives.

In our prior comments, we informed the County that the DEIR failed to evaluate a reasonable range of alternatives to the whole Project. FEIR at 3.2.4-458–3.2.4-461. In response, the FEIR all but admits that two of the alternatives evaluated in the DEIR are not true alternatives to the Project, as they apply to narrow components and would increase the Project’s environmental impacts. See FEIR at 3.2.4-554 (response to comment no. 09-302, failing to defend “Squaw Valley Road” alternative), 3.2.4-55 (response to comment no. 09-303, acknowledging that “the Alternative Tank Location was evaluated due to the uncertainty of the project applicant to reach agreement on purchasing land encompassing the proposed tank site.”)

Furthermore, two additional alternatives evaluated in the DEIR are “no project” alternatives, and one focuses on protection of historic resources. Contrary to the FEIR’s claims, the EIR’s one remaining alternative does not constitute a “reasonable range” of alternatives under CEQA.

2. The FEIR Fails to Demonstrate the Infeasibility of Less Impactful Alternatives.

Although Sierra Watch and numerous other commenters requested that the EIR evaluate a version of the proposed Project without the indoor waterpark, the FEIR still refuses to do so. Instead, the FEIR claims the indoor waterpark is necessary to “provide a comprehensive, world-class, family resort experience to be competitive on an international stage.” FEIR at 3-75. The FEIR similarly indicates that the Reduced

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24 The FEIR also continues to insist that removal of the indoor water park would not result in a substantial reduction in environmental impacts. This is partly because, as explained above, the EIR severely understates the Project’s impacts, including those generated by the indoor water park (e.g., traffic).
Density Alternative “may not meet project objectives for Squaw Valley to be on par with peer world class North American ski destinations.” FEIR at p. 3-62. Yet, the FEIR provides no evidence that an indoor water park is necessary to make Squaw a world-class resort, or that any/all other competitor resorts have such indoor water parks. Indeed, Squaw Valley does not need any new development, much less the mass-scale development proposed in conjunction with the Project, to be competitive as a world class resort. Indeed, Squaw Valley was recently voted the Number 1 Ski Resort in North America by USA Today, and was also selected by the US Ski Team as a host site for the proposed March, 2017 FIS Alpine World Cup. See Exhibit 26.

Furthermore, the FEIR fails to provide any information regarding the feasibility of the alternatives presented in the EIR, and most notably the reduced density alternative that appears to be feasible and would reduce Project impacts. This includes a failure to provide the requested financial feasibility data for the various alternatives, even while the FEIR admits that a financial consultant has prepared this analysis and submitted it to the County. The County should not delay in making this information available to the public, as it is critical that the public review any evidence the County may rely upon in making its feasibility determination. As noted in our letter on the DEIR, the County cannot approve the Project as proposed if there is a feasible alternative that would substantially lessen the Project’s significant impacts. Pub. Res. Code § 21002. An alternative need not meet every Project objective or be the least costly in order to be feasible. See CEQA Guidelines § 15126.6(b).

D. The FEIR Must Be Recirculated.

The firm’s comments on the DEIR set forth CEQA’s standard for recirculation. FEIR at 3.2.4-462 (comment no. 09-306) (citing CEQA Guidelines § 15088.5). The FEIR recognizes, as it must, that this is the correct standard, but asserts the standard has not been met here. FEIR at 3-109–3-111. The FEIR is incorrect. As demonstrated throughout this letter, Sierra Watch and others have presented information that reveals either new or more severe significant environmental impacts, or potentially feasible mitigation measures or alternatives to lessen these impacts, that have not been subject to review and comment in a DEIR. The County must revise and recirculate the DEIR to include proper analysis and mitigation of all the Project’s significant impacts. Otherwise, approval would be illegal under state law.
II. APPROVAL OF THE PROJECT WOULD VIOLATE THE STATE PLANNING AND ZONING LAW AND THE SUBDIVISION MAP ACT.

The State Planning and Zoning Law and the Subdivision Map Act require that development decisions be consistent with the jurisdiction’s general plan. As reiterated by the courts, “[u]nder state law, the propriety of virtually any local decision affecting land use and development depends upon consistency with the applicable general plan and its elements.” Resource Defense Fund v. County of Santa Cruz (1982) 133 Cal.App.3d 800, 806. Accordingly, “[t]he consistency doctrine [is] the linchpin of California’s land use and development laws; it is the principle which infuses the concept of planned growth with the force of law.” Families Unafraid to Uphold Rural El Dorado County v. Board of Supervisors (1998) 62 Cal.App.4th 1332, 1336.

For the reasons described in Part ## of this letter, the Project is inconsistent with the Placer County General Plan and the Squaw Valley General Plan and Land Use Ordinance. Because of the Project’s glaring inconsistencies with these planning documents, approval of this Project would violate State Planning and Zoning Law and the Subdivision Map Act.

III. CONCLUSION

In sum, the EIR is legally inadequate and cannot serve as the basis for Project approval. Further, the Project is inconsistent with key planning policies for the region. For these reasons, Sierra Watch respectfully requests that the Planning Commission recommend denial of the Project.

Very truly yours,

SHUTE, MIHALY & WEINBERGER LLP

Amy J. Bricker
Laurel L. Impett, AICP, Urban Planner
Laura D. Beaton
cc:

Tahoe National Forest
Tahoe Regional Planning Authority
Army Corps of Engineers

California Office of the Attorney General
California Department of Water Resources
California Department of Natural Resources
California State Office of Historic Preservation

Department of California Highway Patrol Truckee Area
CalTrans

Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board

Town of Truckee
Nevada County
Squaw Valley Mutual Water Company
Squaw Valley Public Service District
North Tahoe Fire Protection District
Friends of Squaw Valley
Truckee River Watershed Council

Joanne Roubique
District Ranger Tahoe National Forest
Joanne Marchetta
Executive Director
Leah M Fisher
Senior Project Manager
California North CEQA Enforcement Division
Ed Wilson
Director of Public Affairs
Johnathan Laird
Natural Resources Secretary
Julianne Polanco
State Historic Preservation Officer
Ryan Stonebraker
Captain
Kevin Yount
Regional Planning Liaison and Intergovernmental Review
Laurie Kemper
Lahontan Regional Water Board Ombudsman
Tony Lashbrook
Town Manager
Brian Foss
Planning Director
John Johnson
President
Mike Geary
General Manager
Michael S. Schwartz
Fire Chief
Friends of Squaw Valley Steering Committee
Lisa Wallace
Executive Director
Friends of the West Shore
Sierra Nevada Alliance
Center for Biological Diversity
The League to Save Lake Tahoe
Tahoe Area Sierra Club
Mountain Area Preservation
North Tahoe Protection Alliance
KSL Capital Partners
Squaw Valley Ski Holdings
Squaw Valley Real Estate

Exhibits:

<p>| Exhibit 3 | Alpine Meadows/Squaw Valley Base to Base Gondola Initial Project Application. J. Spenst. |
| Exhibit 5 | USFS Notice of Proposed Action |</p>
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exhibit</th>
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<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td>CEQA Handbook, Appendix E-1 (Preparing a Health Risk Assessment for Land Use Projects). Placer County Air Pollution Control District.</td>
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<td>21</td>
<td>“Announcing Nonstop Flights From Atlanta to Squaw Valley on Delta Airlines.” A. Wirth, April 29, 2016.</td>
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<td>23</td>
<td>California Historical Landmarks By County. California State Parks Office of Historic Preservation. <a href="http://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21387">http://ohp.parks.ca.gov/?page_id=21387</a></td>
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Squaw Valley chief faces community opposition to expansion

Andy Wirth plans to add lodging, restaurants and large adventure center to Truckee-area resort

Sierra Club and other environmental groups have criticized Wirth and plan...
Squaw Valley CEO Andy Wirth knows how to stay calm under pressure.

In October 2013 he hit a pole while skydiving outside Lodi, shearing off most of his right arm and causing massive bleeding from an artery that runs from the shoulder to the forearm. A former backcountry ranger with medic experience, Wirth knew his life was on the line.

He needed to slow the bleeding or he would die before paramedics arrived. He knew shock kills many trauma victims before they can be rescued, so Wirth employed a trick from his ranger days: He told himself to repeat lines from the Pearl Jam song, “Just Breathe.”

Wirth stuck his left hand under his right armpit, stanching the blood before another skydiver arrived and fashioned a tourniquet out of a strap, at Wirth’s direction. Wirth told himself he would survive if he held on until the air ambulance arrived, and that is exactly what happened.

Today, through multiple surgeries and physical therapy, Wirth has regained use of his right arm. His response to the accident serves as the best example of what he considers a cornerstone of his character: resilience.

“YOU INVOKE THE LEGACY OF JOHN MUIR AS YOU PURSUE DESTRUCTION OF HIS BELOVED SIERRA, AND WE ARE ASKING YOU TO STOP.”

Bruce Hamilton, deputy executive director of the Sierra Club

He’s tapping that trait as he presses forward with a plan to greatly expand the facilities at Squaw Valley. Many Tahoe-area residents and environmentalists oppose his proposal, and at times, their criticism has become personal.

Since coming to Squaw in 2010 to lead the resort in its “next phase of growth,” Wirth made the decision to buy Alpine Meadows, the ski resort just south of Squaw. He introduced a plan to link the resorts with a gondola next to the federally
protected Granite Chief Wilderness. Wirth’s plans for Squaw Valley include a substantial increase in residential and overnight housing, new bars and restaurants and a 108-feet-tall, 90,000-square-foot “mountain adventure center.”

Costs are difficult to estimate because the project will be built over 25 years by developers who will buy rights to the land from Squaw, Wirth said. Squaw Valley’s goal is to bring more skiers to the mountain, not make money from real estate, he added.

More than 300 people and several agencies commented on an environmental review of the project, and most were critical, said Tom Mooers, executive director of Sierra Watch, a nonprofit that has been a leading critic of Wirth and the project. The Placer County Board of Supervisors will eventually be asked to sign off on the project.

Sierra Watch, Sierra Club and other organizations have opposed Wirth’s plan to build a gondola next to Granite Chief, a popular spot for hikers that includes a portion of the Pacific Crest Trail. The gondola must be approved by the U.S. Forest Service and Placer County.

Wirth said the development plan will return Squaw, site of the 1960 Winter Olympics, to its past glory days and make it an international destination. The community will benefit from increased tourism, he said.

**Daredevil CEO**

Wirth, 52, has worked in the ski industry since graduating from Colorado State University. Before coming to Squaw, he spent his whole career in Steamboat Springs, Colo., first at the resort that shares the name of the town and then at a company that owns several resorts, including Whistler Blackcomb in British Columbia, Canada, the largest ski resort in North America. Previously two separate resorts, Whistler and Blackcomb were merged in a plan that became a model for Squaw and Alpine Meadows. Six years ago Wirth was hired by Squaw Valley Ski Holdings, a company owned by KSL Capital Partners, a private equity firm that invests in travel and leisure companies.

Wearing a camouflage ski jacket, blue jeans and aviator shades as he walked to his office for an interview, Wirth said, “I run a $100 million company, but I’m not a corporate guy.”
He showed his charismatic side in an episode of the CBS show “Undercover Boss,” in which he sported a mullet wig to try to disguise himself from his then-relatively new employees. The show highlighted some of the difficulties Alpine Meadows employees encountered under a new owner.

Wirth is a mountain climber, an advanced skier who gets on the mountain as many as 65 times a season, and until his accident, a regular skydiver. He advertises his love of adventure with a large black-and-white photo hanging behind his office desk. The picture is of Shane McConkey skiing a mountain wall at Squaw that looks too steep to ski. A legendary skier, McConkey died while skydiving in 2009.

Since Wirth skirted death in 2013, three of his friends have died in similar accidents, including Erik Roner, who crashed into a tree while skydiving at a charity golf tournament at Squaw. Yet Wirth isn’t prepared to give up skydiving.

“I just don’t know if I’m done yet,” he said, adding that he has not skydived since the accident. “It’s the most intense, fun and exhilarating feeling I have ever had.”

Wirth’s risky pursuits make him right at home in Squaw Valley, where hotdog skiers such as JT Holmes and Olympic gold-medal winner Jonny Moseley helped burnish the resort’s image as a place where steep and obstacle-filled runs provide a nirvana for the highly skilled. A section of the resort called KT-22 was once listed on SKI Magazine’s “Devil’s Half Dozen” because of its notoriously challenging runs.

Wirth said Squaw is perfectly complemented by Alpine Meadows, where wide and open runs appeal to less advanced skiers than those at Squaw. By joining Squaw and Alpine Meadows, Wirth hopes to create one of the largest ski resorts in North America, a place where a family of different level skiers can find something to enjoy.

‘Keep Squaw True’

In an edition of the resort’s Squaw Magazine dedicated to the expansion, Wirth repeatedly referred to John Muir, the naturalist who founded the Sierra Club.

The references irked members of the San Francisco-based nonprofit. “You invoke the legacy of John Muir as you pursue destruction of his beloved Sierra, and we are asking you to stop,” Bruce Hamilton, deputy executive director of the Sierra Club, wrote in an email to Wirth earlier this year.
Mooers said the Muir references were Wirth’s attempt at “green-washing,” using environmentalism to promote development. Mooers objects to the size of the project, which would include a structure taller than any other building on the north side of Lake Tahoe. He notes that the county’s environmental review found it would have “significant and unavoidable” effects on scenery, noise and traffic.

“Squaw is an appropriate place for some development, but KSL has come in with something that is so out character with the Tahoe area,” Mooers said.

Sierra Watch has started a campaign against the project called “Keep Squaw True” and handed out bumper stickers and created a website with the slogan. The organization has also circulated a petition asking the county to reject the project.

Squaw Valley expansion
Plans for the ski resort include substantial increases in housing and restaurants, a Mountain Adventure Center and a gondola linking it to Alpine Meadows ski area.

Mooers and other critics have repeatedly criticized the plan for the mountain adventure center because of its size and its emphasis on indoor activities in a region known for outdoor fun. The center’s plans are in the conceptual stage, but among its possible activities are zip-lining, simulated sky diving and rock climbing.

“What he’s doing is a threat to the mountains that gave birth to the modern conservation movement,” Mooers said of Wirth. “Andy works for KSL, and his job is to expand the assets of the company.”
Sierra Watch and several other environmental organizations sent a letter to Wirth last year, asking him to withdraw his proposal to build a gondola next to Granite Chief Wilderness. Forestry officials unsuccessfully tried to buy the private land where the gondola would be built. The letter said the wilderness designation by Congress in 1984 was a “clear statement of its value to our nation; that we recognize that this land is special – and it should remain that way.”

The wilderness area is “near and dear to the people of this area,” said Joanne Roubique, district ranger for the U.S. Forest Service, which has been asked by Squaw to approve the gondola. The agency is conducting an environmental review of the project, and a final decision, which will be made by the supervisor for the Tahoe National Forest, likely won’t come until sometime next year, she said.

‘I’m an environmentalist’

When protesters braved the cold in February to hold signs in Squaw Valley saying “Keep Squaw True” and other messages against the expansion proposal, Wirth showed up with a box of hot chocolate from Starbucks to help keep them warm.

Wirth, whose office contains framed quotations from Muir, calls himself an environmentalist, and said he has been working to close a coal power plant outside Reno. He said responsible land management was instilled in him at a young age. His grandfather, Conrad Wirth, was the longest-serving director of the National Park Service, having held the position for 13 years. His great-grandfather, Theodore, helped design the Minneapolis park system and was a leading figure in the country’s urban park movement.

Andy Wirth said he understands the resistance to the Squaw Valley expansion. As someone who spent half of his life in Steamboat Springs, he saw how fiercely residents want to protect mountain towns. However, Wirth said the rhetoric surrounding the development plan does not match the reality. For one thing, almost all of the development at Squaw would happen on what is now an asphalt parking lot, he said, not on undeveloped land.

“IT’S THE MOST INTENSE, FUN AND EXHILARATING FEELING I HAVE EVER HAD.”

Andy Wirth, on skydiving
Wirth said the Squaw development plan has been dramatically reduced in response to complaints from residents during the more than 300 community meetings the resort has held since announcing the project. The proposed adventure center, which he said is needed to attract offseason visitors and provide activities when winter weather does not allow skiing, has been slightly reduced in size.

Eric Poulsen, whose father co-founded Squaw Valley, said Wirth has endured a lot of misleading rhetoric, including the argument that the development plan is somehow out of line with Squaw’s origins. He said his father wanted a European-style village, as proposed by Wirth, and hoped to join Squaw with Alpine Meadows, although with a different form of transportation than a gondola.

Wirth and KSL “are going to put Squaw Valley back on the map,” said Poulsen, who acknowledged he will benefit financially from the resort’s growth, as he owns stock in KSL and property in Squaw Valley. “It’s very controversial in the community. I think a lot of people want to keep Squaw just the way it is.”

Wirth’s response to opponents has been as proactive as it was when he saved himself in the Lodi-area vineyard, said Holmes, the professional skier and adventure athlete sponsored by Squaw Valley. He convinced Wirth to start skydiving several years ago and was with him on that fateful day outside Lodi.

“I don’t envy his position and all the criticism and scrutiny he’s faced,” Holmes said. “But he rises to the task. There’s never a moment when Andy Wirth is not solution-oriented. Andy Wirth listens and adapts his plans as needed.”

*Brad Branan: 916-321-1065, @BradB_at_SacBee*

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“Everybody needs beauty as well as bread, places to play in and pray in, where nature may heal and give strength to body and soul alike.” —John Muir

John Muir’s words resonate today, even though they were penned more than a hundred years ago. Many, myself included, find Muir’s writing compelling because it speaks to fundamental truths. Beauty and bread. Mr. Muir, a Scottish immigrant, was the godfather of preservation and wilderness in North America. He originated an ethos to which most mountain people subscribe even today, and one to which future generations are likely to also.

Regardless of the time of year you visit Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows, you are here to ski, ride, hike, play, pray, and to break bread with family and friends. To appropriate Muir again, these remarkable mountains give “strength to body and soul alike.” We welcome you here to experience what Mr. Muir is prescribing!

It’s with great pride that I speak of our world-class staff here at Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows —more than 2,000 employees strong. It’s a team that has chosen to call the mountains home and remains deeply engaged in helping all of our customers, regardless of their origination, enjoy their time here to the utmost.

In fact, that sentiment is our company mission: “We are committed to creating extraordinary experiences for our guests and team, while being stewards of these legendary mountains.”

Warm, but snow-filled regards,

Andy Wirth, President & Chief Executive Officer
Squaw Valley Ski, Holdings LLC

photograph Court Leve
SnoVentures

In a word: FUN! Gently sloped terrain serviced by an easy-to-reach beginner lift and two surface carpets. Warm up and relax in the lodge and take a spin on the snow tubing conveyor.

The Village

Stay aloft in a condominium style suite. Explore the pedestrian Village. Full dining options, gifts and keepsakes or catch some live music in the Village Plaza.

Snow King

Take in the lake views while skiing and snowboarding down the expansive, winding, groomed terrain. Grizzly plaque for acres of incredible newly-planted tree skiing!

KT-22

AKA The Mother Ship, this zone is a bucket list for the serious skier. 2000 vertical feet of steep runs, chutes, gullies, cliffs and moguls as well as the double blue groomed "Saddle"

Headwall

Explore by steep and moguls and egghead. Palen's lift. The Sweet spot of all. Mild grooves and expansive groves. Cuz, it's a grove!
Silverado - Choose from the groomed Land Bridge or the adventurous expert level ride of seven cliff-napped bowls to Silverado. Find your way to Broken Arrow and Tower 1.6 for powder or great spring corn skiing.

Big Blue - An enviable Acropolis of gently sloped terrain with spectacular lake views, easy access to High Camp and the introductory Belmont terrain park and High Camp learning terrain.

Shirley - Take in tree runs, wall-to-wall corduroy at the expansive off-piste of Shirley Bowl or go more remote by exploring Solitude’s rolling off-piste terrain.

The Chief - Steeps, chutes, gullies, rolling terrain; groomers and hikers to terrain that rewards the effort with incredible views of Lake Tahoe and the surrounding Alpines wilderness.
Here's another one of George at Alpine Meadows. We're in Alpine Bowl, off the front side above the Alpine Chair, in December of 2014. I love shooting George because he's got a graceful powder turn, and when we work together it's fast and efficient. If I tell him there's a spot I want him to hit, he generally hits it.
later, he traveled to Craig Hospital in Englewood, Colorado, to rehab and learn to live as a quadriplegic. In July, he moved back to North Lake Tahoe, where he continues to get stronger and hopes to sit ski this winter. It’s been hard for him to look at the photos he’s taken over his 11-year photography career, but frames like the four featured here remind him of what he loves, and serve as a gift from him to others. He’s grateful to all the people who’ve supported him and his family since the accident. “The one silver lining is how much love, help, and financial support we’ve received,” he says.

You can donate to Jason Abraham’s rehab at his crowdfunding site www.youcaring.com/medical-fundraiser/ayo-let’s-help-a-bro/335477, or through the High Fives Foundation, which supports athletes by raising injury prevention awareness while providing resources to those who suffer life-altering injuries (highfivesfoundation.org).

That’s Scott Gaffney off the shoulder of Mainline Pocket. It was a windy day, and we’d been in Mainline Pocket proper, and Scott was just kind of lapping it. I suggested we go look at these rocks as no one had been shooting there. Scott was initially reluctant, but we ended up getting some good shots.
In the not too distant future, Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows will connect via a 13-minute lift.

by Paul Tolmé | photograph Jeff Engebretson

A native East Coaster, I was stupidly slow to “discover” Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows and the joys of High Sierra skiing. What a dope.

But in 2010, I finally moved to Tahoe for a few years. My yellow lab and I holed up in a rickety cabin with a potbelly woodstove during a winter that shattered records. The 2010–11 season saw 810 inches of thick and dense Sierra snowfall at Squaw. I skied until the Fourth of July, spooning tracks with bikini-topped rippers.

Squaw and Alpine abide in neighboring valleys, but for most of their history, they were worlds apart in terms of psychographics. New to Tahoe, though, I didn’t carry the baggage of preconceptions. Squaw’s terrain and energy wowed me, and I blasted around there religiously. But I soon gravitated toward Alpine—hiking to Ward Peak, exploring the Sherwood Bowls, dropping into the steeps of Art’s Knob, and stopping at the top of the Lakeview Chair to snap photos of glittering Lake Tahoe.

My first winter also coincided with Squaw’s progressive new ownership, which set in motion the unification of Squaw and Alpine. I got my first good look at the terrain that joins them, called White Wolf, courtesy of gold medalist and Squaw ambassador Jonny Moseley. He warned against skiing this out-of-bounds private land, but noted that it was where the resorts would, someday, build a connecting lift. To me, this made perfect sense.

The precise date that someone first thought of linking Squaw and Alpine is lost to history, but longtime locals say it was the late 1950s. Back then, adventurous skiers
sometimes toured out the backside of Squaw and down to the road that wound toward what’s now Alpine Meadows. Writer Eddy Ancinas in her book, Tales from Two Valleys: Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows, credits the idea to Squaw founder Wayne Poulsen.

If only they’d have linked the two mountains back then. These days, just proposing the idea of stringing a gondola over such challenging terrain, on federal and private land, and near a Wilderness area, is a quagmire. But behind the scenes, as early as 2010, Squaw CEO Andy Wirth and White Wolf’s owner Troy Caldwell began negotiation and planning. Rumors floated around for years, but in the spring of 2015, I heard the definitive news: Squaw Valley Ski Holdings had reached an agreement with Caldwell to build a Base-to-Base Gondola—B2B to insiders.

Skiers and snowboarders can currently connect both resorts off one pass via a courtesy shuttle ride, but the Base-to-Base Gondola will cruise over KT-22 Peak, loading and unloading skiers at two locations: one downslope of the patrol hut on KT-22 and another high atop Alpine Meadows near Estelle Lake. It will be one of the most transformative ski lifts at any resort in America, uniting two unique destinations to create a megaresort—the second biggest in the U.S.—with 43 lifts and more than 270 trails.

Squaw hired world-renowned mountain resort planner, the SE Group, to design the gondola, which they’ll construct in a way that minimizes impact on the alpine environment. Helicopters will ferry towers to their designated locations, eliminating the need to bulldoze roads. Engineers will keep the height of the towers short to maintain the gorgeous skyline. Fourteen hundred passengers an hour will glide between Squaw and Alpine, accessing 6,000 total acres. “The number one question I get is: How soon can you build it?” says Wirth, adding that it won’t happen overnight. Federal, state, and county officials must grant their approval, a process Wirth estimates could take two

“The number one question I get is: How soon can you build it?”
—Squaw CEO and President Andy Wirth

(continued on page 39)
How something as simple as a new lift can unify skiers. by Lisa Richardson | photograph Dave Cox

In the early 1990s, when the Whistler versus Blackcomb battle was heated, skiers could buy a Whistler pass, a Blackcomb pass, or a Dual Mountain pass, geared toward visitors. Jaded locals would laugh at those naïve enough to want to ski both peaks. Everybody declared an affinity. You loved Whistler’s rolling organic terrain, or you proselytized over the fall line runs that had been master-engineered on Blackcomb. Although the resorts eventually merged in 1996, they remained divided operationally and in spirit: “It used to be, ‘Where are you skiing today? Whistler?’” says Dave Brownlie, President and CEO of Whistler Blackcomb. “If you answered, ‘Oh, Blackcomb,’ the reply was, ‘Well, maybe we can meet for a beer afterwards.’” It wasn’t until the Peak 2 Peak Gondola dangled over the valley and physically connected the two resorts that that loyalty stopped dividing people.

The Peak 2 Peak created a seamless, dramatic, 11-minute transit between two highly distinct Canadian pinnacles, with a combined 8,171 skiable acres. Beyond the way the gondola altered the skiing experience, it rebranded Whistler Blackcomb, to the rest of the world, as one incredible destination.

Squaw President and CEO Andy Wirth sees a corollary in what the Peak 2 Peak accomplished at Whistler Blackcomb and the plan to unite Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows while retaining each resort’s character. Whistler Blackcomb’s tribal rivalries now seem as quaint as white turtlenecks. The mountains retained their distinct personalities, but skiers and riders could traverse both with ease and without stigma. And rather than blight the landscape, the Peak 2 Peak provided a unique, jaw-dropping vantage point.

In many ways, that famed lift—and its unifying effects—serves as a parallel to Squaw and Alpine’s recently proposed Base-to-Base Gondola. Now, Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows—more than 6,000 combined acres—are set to undergo a similar connection. “We purchased Alpine Meadows in 2011, and we’ve spent the past three years building a relationship and negotiating the requisite agreements, as well as studying, researching, and contemplating how best to make this six-decade-long dream become a reality,” says Wirth. “We’re taking this on now because it makes sense to our customers and we built a credible relationship with White Wolf owner, Troy Caldwell. Squaw and Alpine as one true destination? It’s not hard to argue in favor of the benefits.”
THE HUMAN LINK

Years ago, a hot dog skier with a dream named Troy Caldwell bought a piece of land between Squaw and Alpine. Now, he’s the keystone to linking the two mountains.

by Jason Daley
photograph Rachid Dahnoun

Alexander Cushing, the legendary founder of Squaw Resort, must have spit out his Sanka when he received a letter from the Southern Pacific Land Company telling him to send his next rent check to the scruffy couple in the trailer near the base of Alpine.

This was 1989; for decades prior, Cushing leased the top 70 acres of expert terrain on KT-22, waiting for Southern Pacific to sell him the ridge. But when the call finally came, a clueless accountant reportedly passed on the deal without telling senior management.

It was around this same time that Troy Caldwell walked into the Southern Pacific offices, haggling to buy a few acres lower down on the massif so that he and his wife Susan could open a swank bed and breakfast next to the ski area. One dream crushed, another realized. The Southern Pacific suits agreed to sell, but on the condition that Caldwell buy the entire 460-acre swath between Squaw and Alpine.

With no clear plan how to monetize the purchase, Caldwell did just that. The selling price? Less than half a million dollars. Today, a corridor of Caldwell’s land, which includes the summit of KT-22 and the drainage known as White Wolf, is essential to the completion of the new Base-to-Base Gondola that will shuttle skiers between one world class mountain and another.

After years of researching the best route, Squaw President and CEO Andy Wirth went to Caldwell asking if he could build. Luckily for Wirth, the onetime pro skier Caldwell shared the vision of connecting Squaw and Alpine. In April, the duo announced that Caldwell will allow a high-speed gondola to run through White Wolf. The project will start after Placer County and the U.S. Forest Service review the plans. Ultimately, the connection will mean fewer cars on the road and more vertical feet per day for skiers.

The project also puts the Caldwells’ vision back on track—they’re preparing to start work on 38 high-end avalanche-safe and fireproof units that will include private skiing on about 300 acres of White Wolf terrain. “When we first got started, we had this little dream to build a bed and breakfast on five acres,” says Caldwell. “Then all of the sudden we were the owners of this giant ski mountain. With the gondola, I realized, oh my gosh, we can be a big part of that. Now we’re off and running on an even bigger dream.”

38 SQUAW
years. Ten months after that, the B2B should spin.

It’s hard to overstate just how radically this new lift will enhance the experience at both resorts. Historically, Squaw and Alpine were divided not just by a ridgeline and ownership, but also by intense skier loyalty. With the B2B Gondola in place, skiers will meet for breakfast, jump in the lift, and share their favorite runs at both resorts. Still, Wirth is adamant that he wants each resort to maintain its own distinct identity.

The goal is to keep the impact of the lift as low as possible. SE Group studied the terrain for three years and considered more than 30 alignments before settling on the proposed corridor. Chris Cushing, head of SE Group’s global resort planning, says, “There were a lot of challenges and physical constraints due to the topography, cliffs, wetlands, and wildlife habitat,” but the plan is in place and corresponding investments include many environmental initiatives.

This is also in sync with the new direction of Squaw Valley | Alpine Meadows, since ownership of both transferred to Squaw Valley Ski Holdings, the parent company, which has been a strong voice for climate action in Tahoe. “Squaw is really stepping up,” says Chris Steinkamp, executive director of the climate advocacy organization Protect Our Winters, or POW, which partners with Squaw. For this season, Squaw wrapped the Funitel in POW branding, a first for a North American resort. “It’s a visual illustration of their support for our climate work and a bold statement of the need for action on climate change,” says Steinkamp.

Even more telling: Management is pushing Squaw’s primary electric utility to close a coal powered plant and ramp up its production of renewable energy (see “The Ski Resort and the Coal Burner,” on page 26). The goal is to power the B2B with solar energy. “That’s outside of the normal business actions of a ski resort,” says Steinkamp, “but it’s precisely how ski resorts should think and act.”

The B2B lift is emblematic of this change. As a Tahoe skier, I witnessed the evolution firsthand. Squaw and Alpine have incredible terrain, but for many years they lacked a welcoming attitude and modern infrastructure. I recall getting utterly lost on a foggy day at Squaw, which in the old days had almost no trail signage. Locals, who don’t need trail signs, loved it, but this lack of attention to serving guests made Squaw intimidating. One of the new company’s first orders of business was to draft legible trail maps and add signs so visitors could easily navigate. “We want to be welcoming and approachable,” says Wirth. “The guest experience is our top priority.”

Alas, after five incredible winters in Tahoe and countless days on the slopes of both resorts, I moved away in 2015. But I have plenty of reasons to return. I’ve made friends to last a lifetime. I may have been stupidly slow to discover Squaw and Alpine, but these two resorts made an indelible mark on my life. And skiing them both is precisely what Wayne Poulsen had in mind when he explored these majestic valleys so many decades ago, with the dream of elevating California skiing to new heights.
The Last Pioneers
by Megan Michelson
photographs Rachid Dahnoun
When Wayne Poulsen first gazed at Squaw Valley in 1931, he saw a majestic meadow at the foot of towering granite peaks. Even then, as a teenage ski jumper from Reno, Nevada, he saw the area's potential. By age 16, he was convinced that someday he would build a ski resort in those immense, snowcapped mountains.

“Imagine Squaw Valley with nothing but a meandering stream in a big green meadow surrounded by mountains. Who wouldn't fall in love?” says Eddy Ancinas, a longtime Poulsen family friend and author of the book Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows: Tales from Two Valleys. “For Wayne, it was love of the land first—the ski area came later.”

A gifted athlete, Wayne launched himself into ski jumping championships and later coached college skiing. While teaching skiing in Sun Valley, Idaho, he met Gladys “Sandy” Kunau, who grew up on New York City's Fifth Avenue. They fell in love, and in 1942 they were married. According to Eric Poulsen, now 64 and one of Wayne and Sandy's eight children, Wayne told Sandy, “We're moving to Squaw Valley.” She asked, “Where will we live?” And he said, ‘In a tent.’”

In 1943, Wayne purchased 640 acres of land in Squaw Valley from Southern Pacific Railroad, and in 1948, looking for an investor to help build a ski resort in the valley, he turned to Alex Cushing, who he'd met in Alta, Utah. Cushing went on to develop the resort, while Wayne bought the rest of the land and began selling plots—the first sold for between $750 and $1,500. He built many of the valley's first homes.

“My dad wanted to create a unique mountain enclave, a mountain way of life for people in an idyllic setting,” says Glen Poulsen, 55, and the second youngest Poulsen sibling. “Of course, skiing and winter sports were a part of that.”

Wayne and Sandy built a home in the valley using surplus Air Force barracks materials. Their historic house is now the site of a restaurant, Graham's at Squaw. They raised their brood—Chris, Wayne Jr., Lance, Eric, Sandra, Craig, Glen, and Russell—as skiers. Three of them raced on the U.S. Ski Team. “The only thing to do during the winter was ski, so we became skiers,” says Eric.

The PoulSENS hosted ski jumping tournaments in front of their house and caught six-pound trout in nearby streams. Wayne trained glider pilots in Normandy, and flew commercially for Pan Am for 30-plus years. While he was away, Sandy ran the household and much of the growing town—driving the school bus, managing real estate sales, running the post office, and operating the family's ranching business. And it was Sandy, descending a high peak toward the mountain's base, who knocked off 22 kick turns on the way down. Wayne named the run KT-22 in her honor.

Wayne died in 1995, at age 79, and Sandy passed away in 2007 at 89. But when Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows are finally connected by the planned Base-to-Base Gondola—another of Wayne's original goals will be realized. “He conceptualized these large ski areas like you have in France and Italy,” says Glen. “His vision in the long run was to connect all of these valleys.”

For the Poulsen family, Squaw Valley will always be home. “You come around the corner into Squaw Valley and it's an amazing sight,” says Glen. “The original settlers who walked into Squaw called it the most beautiful valley the eye of man had ever beheld. It's still just as meaningful to our family.”

Three generations of Poulsens still live in the Tahoe area.

Boy meets girl. They envision a mountain enclave, then build Squaw Valley from the ground up.

Meet the Poulsen family.
In terms of image anyway, Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows have historically been opposites. Sure, they knock edges along the Sierra Nevada’s Pacific Crest, but ask anyone and they’ll say they’re a breed apart—like Alta is to Snowbird, Mad River Glen is to Stowe, or Aspen Highlands is to Aspen Mountain.

Here’s Squaw: 3,600 acres of cliff-packed, undulating terrain, high-speed lifts, and a vertical drop of 2,850 feet launched the careers of endless pro skiers—from Scot Schmidt to Michelle Parker—and the fevered dreams of next-gen huckers. On a powder day, you can hear their gleeful screams in the rocky Fingers beneath arguably the most famous lift on earth, KT-22.

Obviously, there’s way more to Squaw than that—including mellow terrain and a community with deep roots, but as with all myths there’s some truth behind it. Take the Squaw skier and Olympian Julia Mancuso. Not only can she rip an 85mph downhill and medal, she can podium at the toughest big-mountain freeskiing competition in the world, the Xtreme Verbier. Squaw taught her to rail merciless race turns, then storm 40-degree untracked snow in the same boots. Everything at Squaw feels bigger than everywhere else. You don’t just hot tub after skiing; you ride a tram and soak in a giant bath at 8,200 feet.

Now, for the Alpine Meadows typecasting: Park your Subaru, walk to the lone, ‘80s-era lodge, and go skiing—telemark skiing. People come for the hike-to back bowls perched on the knife-edge ridge of John Muir-inspiring Pacific Crest. You can dine on Swiss raclette in the mid-mountain Chalet, or down pizza in an old-school locker room-turned cafeteria amongst families with Walden-quoting kids. And you’ll blend in perfectly in a duct-taped jacket. By Squaw standards, Alpine is petite—2,400 acres and 1,802 vertical feet—but the backcountry access makes it limitless—and the backcountry vibe infuses the place. There’s even a cookie lady (at Treats Café) who knows your order.

As with Squaw, there’s more to Alpine—endless low angle groomers and generations of families come to mind—but those images don’t make it into magazines. There’s also truth behind the chill powder skier perception. Alpine ski patrollers tell you which zone holds the best snow. Slow double chairs like Alpine Bowl Chair set the pace—nobody's in a hurry because the powder lasts for days. Famous athletes? None. Unless they’re purposely flying under the radar.

A new gondola will soon join these worlds in a way no one has yet seen. But what each hill’s management, employees, and skiers have made perfectly clear is that the unique character of both resorts will remain. The lift will just allow easy access to an unprecedented 6,000 skiable acres and 270-plus trails for all abilities. One quick ride will whisk you from one authentic resort to another, and open your eyes to how relevant they both still are. ☃️
Greg Steen (left) co-founded Flylow ski wear, telemarks 70 days a season, and skis Alpine Meadows religiously. Meanwhile, Cody Townsend, a professional big mountain skier, admires himself while skiing Squaw Valley fanatically.
Not-So-Secret STASH

PHOTOGRAPH HANK DE VRÊ
SKIER INGRID BACKSTROM