

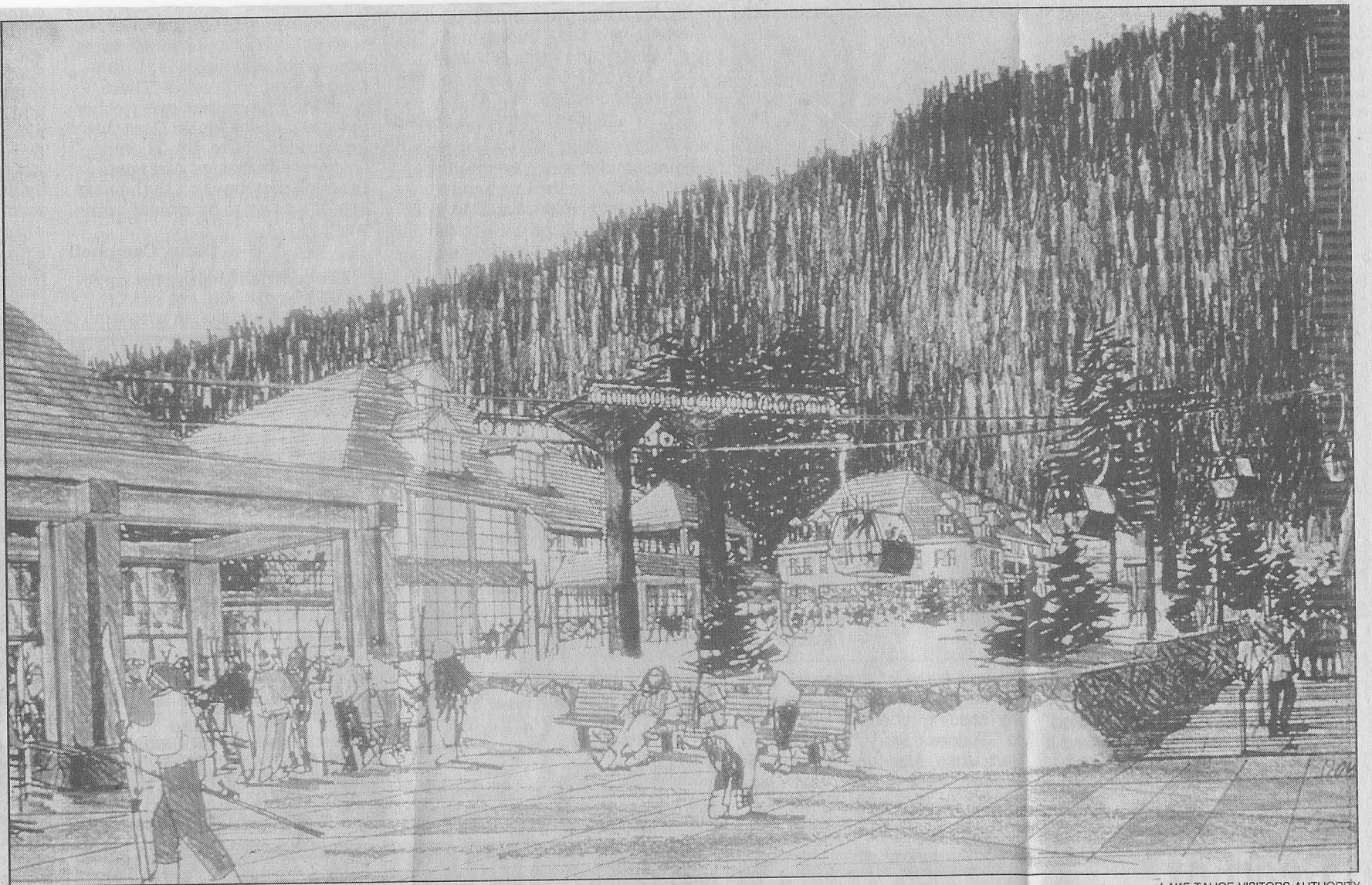
VENTURE

All the way

■ Double centuries were just a warm-up for cross-country cyclist./12D

The south shore's development plan has even environmentalists at odds:
Is the lake doomed, or can new efforts save it?

21ST-CENTURY TAHOE



LAKE TAHOE VISITORS AUTHORITY

The gondola that will link the Park Avenue Project to the reshaped Heavenly is seen by some as a deterrent to cars and by others as an encouragement

BY JOSH WILSON
Special to Venture

Big changes are in the works for South Lake Tahoe.

The municipality is bringing in \$250 million for a project to reduce transportation snarls, improve air quality, give a face lift to the kitschy, declining Park Avenue district, and redress water pollution issues.

Meanwhile, nearby Heavenly Valley has the support of the League to Save Lake Tahoe for its \$90 million, 20-year master plan, which was recently approved by the U.S. Forest Service and the bi-state

Heavenly's vision of the future: more skiers and clearer water

Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Heavenly's master plan would combine facilities improvements and expansion with erosion control, wetlands relocation and other environmental projects.

The problem is that Lake Tahoe is still losing. The lake's legendary clarity is disappearing at an average rate of 1½ feet each year. Despite roughly \$200 million in mostly public erosion mitigation efforts since 1988, Tahoe is plagued by sedimentation, algae and runoff of automobile fluids and other waste from paved areas.

Of the lake's decline, Bob Richards of the Tahoe Research Group at the University of California-Davis, said, "It's a hard thing to reverse, or even arrest or slow down. Everything that goes into the lake stays there for an awfully long time . . . we're talking hundreds of years."

According to Richards, the rate of loss of clarity will change if there are enough pollution controls, but it's going to take "longer than the life span of most of the people around there. We just have to go on the assumption that if we had not spent that money things would have been much worse."

This is a philosophy that Stan Hansen, Heavenly's vice president of planning, embraces wholeheartedly, along with the "Keep Tahoe Blue" slogan of the League to Save Lake Tahoe. "One thing we can't lose is the clarity of Lake Tahoe; we cannot do that," he said. "We have to keep doing more. . . . (It's) just starting to show we might be reversing the trend, over the last 30 years, of the degradation of the lake, and we have to keep doing more. (Tahoe Research Group director Charles Goldman) stated he thinks he's starting to see maybe a peaking, and maybe even a reversal starting in the next two years."

But Hansen's enthusiasm may be overstated. "It's not an accurate quote," Goldman said. "Tahoe has a retention time of about 700 years. Recovery is going to be very slow, and water quality continues to decline."

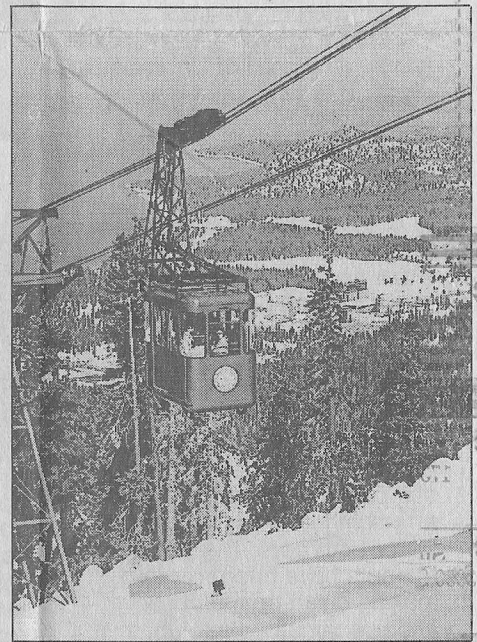
Goldman said that without current erosion and pollution control efforts, the lake's deterioration would be greatly accelerated. Still, he said, "it's going to take a number of additional years of data to detect any improvement."

Heavenly, identified by the League to Save Lake Tahoe executive director Rochelle Nason as a major source of erosion into the lake, has devoted part of the new master plan to revegetation and restoration. Nevertheless, some Tahoe residents consider the resort's expansion inappropriate.

"The amount of development in my mind exceeds the amount of restoration," said Nason's predecessor, Laurel Ames. League board member Jim Hildinger shares this view, adding, "Heavenly should spend their money to correct the mistakes they've made, without making more of them."

Ames and Hildinger are part of a vocal minority that disagrees with the league's decision to endorse Heavenly's master plan. Much of their displeasure centers on a proposed gondola to connect Heavenly's slopes to South Lake Tahoe's casino and hotel district. Advocates assert this will reduce automo-

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MERCURY NEWS FILE PHOTOGRAPH

In 1964, Heavenly Valley's tramway overlooked a less crowded commercial strip along Lake Tahoe's south shore.

DOUBLE VISIONS

Approval has been given to Heavenly ski resort's master plan, which is associated with a development project in South Lake Tahoe's commercial area.

Heavenly

The ski resort's plan includes new buildings and seven new lifts, intended to increase visitors by 70 percent.

■ The first phase includes a gondola from the South Lake commercial area, three new chair lifts and a

VENTURE

Namesake lake at heart of Tahoe resort debate

Decades of pollution hard to undo

■ LAKE TAHOE

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bile traffic from South Lake Tahoe up to the existing base lodge at Heavenly, thereby improving auto pollution problems. Naysayers say the gondola is expected to attract between 5,460 and 7,100 additional visitors and their automobiles each ski day, and assert that accommodating this influx is bound to have environmental impacts.

Another issue is the nature of the demand for new ski facilities, and whether this justifies Heavenly's expansion. The company was required to present a demand analysis to the U.S. Forest Service and the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, the joint California-Nevada authority that administers development in the Tahoe basin. Assessments of the document diverge sharply.

Drawing more skiers

"To our mind the demand analysis they produced was quite farcical," said John Moore, the Sierra Club's point man on the issue. Moore said Heavenly asserted that though demand for new facilities hasn't increased, the company could successfully market the expansion and attract skiers away from other resorts not only around Tahoe, but from other states, like Colorado and Utah.

"That might or might not be the case," he continued, "but that hardly constitutes a demonstration of a definite demand there to be satisfied. . . . The Tahoe basin is a special place, and if you're

going to do something that might have significant environmental impacts, you ought to be able to prove that it's really needed."

Of Moore's comment, Heavenly's Hansen said, "I guess everybody has their opinion. Obviously the Forest Service and the TRPA didn't feel that way. . . . And I don't think there's any area in the United States that would be scrutinized more than here in Lake Tahoe."

According to Robert McDowell, of the U.S. Forest Service office in South Lake Tahoe, "The demand analysis was produced by an expert in the field, using the best available information." McDowell said that the document, developed by Ford Frick of the Denver-based consultancy Browne, Bortz and Coddington, anticipates growth over 20 years.

The TRPA's Andrew Strain, who worked closely on the master plan review process, called the demand analysis reasonable, if not necessarily rigorous. "It did not use any sophisticated economic model, and I think that's why John Moore was having a problem," he said. But, he continued, "because (Heavenly is) a for-profit business, they should also be responsive to the changes in the market and the changes in skier preferences, and not trying to get themselves overextended (by) building a lot of new lifts when they haven't seen the demand."

McDowell also pointed out that expansion of the ski industry is built into the institutional plans adopted by both the Forest Ser-

vice and the TRPA in 1987 and 1988, respectively. Heavenly's master plan, he said, is actually less ambitious than what the two government agencies permit.

Both the Forest Service and TRPA are concerned with the Tahoe region's economic health, and the approval of the Heavenly plan reflects this. "We are charged with striking a balance between a healthy economy and a healthy environment, recognizing that the two are interdependent," Strain said.

Finding that balance will be remain a challenge in coming years: The Sierra Nevada Ecosystem Project, a federally funded three-year assessment of the Sierra's ecological health, predicts that the mountains' human population will triple by the year 2040. Although most of that increase will be outside the Tahoe basin, development and transportation issues remain compelling.

A question of resources

Curiously, with the approval of the plan, the Sierra Club has chosen to step away from the fray. "Having failed to persuade TRPA or the Forest Service to make any changes whatever, we didn't choose to pursue it further after the approval. It was a question of finding the resources to do it," Moore said.

This reflects a sense of resignation many environmentalists are feeling: that development, and subsequent degradation of the Tahoe watershed, is inevitable.

"I will go along with that," said the lake league's Hildinger. Nevertheless, he feels Heavenly's expansion will only add insult to

injury.

"The basin is at a threshold," Ames said. "They can decide at this point that accommodating future development is more important than the clarity of the lake. Or they can emphasize the restoration, and start cranking down on all the bad development that exists, plus limit the new development to non-damaging proposals."

Goldman asserts that although the long-term trend is toward increasing algae growth and loss of clarity, optimism is still important, and the efforts of the past have been enormously significant. "If people gave up now, the rate of [decline] would accelerate and it would be a lost cause. But I think we've seen a real change of attitude. I think everybody realizes property values and use of the basin is likely to decline if the beauty of the environment declines."

For the lake league's Rochelle Nason, some trade-offs are necessary. She says the league supports the construction of the gondola because, despite concerns that it would be a visual affront and would increase the number of people coming in to Lake Tahoe, "we felt that the environmental benefits of providing an alternative system of transportation were very great."

What's more, she said, the new plan goes a long way to redress past problems.

"When Heavenly was built it was virtually bulldozed out of the mountain," she continued. "It's been a major source of sedimentation to streams in the South Lake Tahoe area. The master plan requires (Heavenly) to revegetate those areas and take other measures to stabilize the soil."

Nason said the league will examine each project brought forth under Heavenly's master plan. If

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— *Dr. Charles Goldman,
Tahoe Research Group*

the company is not meeting water-quality requirements, she said, the group can use legal leverage under the TRPA compact and the Clean Water Act to prevent individual projects from moving forward.

She also points out that negotiations between Heavenly, the League, and other interested parties eliminated all road improvements throughout the South Shore, earmarking that funding for public transit.

"Although we have a lot of concerns that were not completely addressed," she concluded, "on the whole we see a lot of positives to the plan, both in terms of transportation, and in terms of watershed restoration."