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Gondola would create 1 of largest US ski areas near Tahoe

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RENO, Nev. (AP) — A resort operator announced plans Monday to build a high-speed gondola connecting two Lake Tahoe slopes and creating one of the largest ski areas in the country.

The gondola will link Alpine Meadows with Squaw Valley, which hosted the 1960 Winter Olympics and later slipped in positions after the development of major resorts in Colorado, Utah and elsewhere. The move follows a similar effort in Utah by another company to create a gondola connection between two major resorts.

Conservationists who have been fighting a larger expansion plan at the ski resort said they have concerns about the proposed gondola but will reserve judgment on the idea until they see more details.

Environmentalists are already fighting with businesses over a plan to build 10-story high rises and a large indoor water park that they believe could mar the picturesque mountain landscape surrounding Lake Tahoe.

The gondola would make it easier for skiers and snowboarders to experience the different terrain of the adjoining Sierra Nevada resorts in California while reducing vehicle traffic between them, said Andy Wirth, president and CEO of Squaw Valley Ski Holdings LLC.

"We are quite confident that this connection and providing one experience will return us to being one of the pre-eminent destinations in all of North America," Wirth told The Associated Press. "Now, you basically have this incredible pairing of mountains, this easy to get back and forth, and it makes it one experience."

The project is pending review by U.S. Forest Service and Placer County, California.

"Today's announcement raises a wide range of questions about the future of Squaw Valley, Alpine Meadows and Lake Tahoe," said Tom Mooers, executive director of the nonprofit Sierra Watch.

"We look forward to seeing the specifics in an actual proposal so we can address important issues — ranging from threats to the neighboring Granite Chief Wilderness Area to potential changes to the Tahoe skiing experience," he said.

Connecting the two mountains has been a vision of the resorts' founders and skiers for six decades, Wirth said, and the combined 6,000 acres of skiable terrain would make it among the nation's largest.

Last month, Vail Resorts Inc. received approval from Park City, Utah, planning officials to build a high-speed gondola that would connect two ski resorts it owns there. The company said the lift linking Park City Mountain Resort and Canyons Resort would offer a combined 7,300 acres of skiable terrain and make it the largest ski area in the United States.

The 1997 merger of the Whistler and Blackcomb resorts north of Vancouver, British Columbia, formed the largest ski resort in North America, with some 8,000 acres of skiable terrain.

Wirth said a major stumbling block was recently removed when his company reached an agreement with Troy Caldwell, who owns property located between the two resorts, to create the base-to-base gondola connection.

Alpine Meadows is known for more family-friendly terrain while Squaw Valley offers some of the world's most challenging slopes.

Wirth declined comment on the cost of the project, saying the company is still in negotiations with the lift manufacturer.

The company has designed the project to reduce its aesthetic and environmental impacts, and plans to submit its plans to the governmental agencies within two months, Wirth said.

"We think the project is very approvable," he said, adding the gondola will be located in such a way that it won't be visible from the adjoining Granite Chief Wilderness.

Squaw Valley has scaled back separate expansion plans for its village after environmentalists voiced concerns that mountain views, traffic and water supplies would be adversely affected. Placer County is expected to release a draft environmental impact report on the plans later this spring, Wirth said.

Mooers said that while the latest version of the expansion plan is an improvement, it still would result in the construction of up to 750 new hotel-condominium units and about 1,500 new hotel bedrooms.

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