By Megan Michelson | Photos by tk

Squaw Valley, Calif., is in the midst of a massive resort overhaul, and the community is sharply divided. How did things get to this point, and is there a compromise in the future? The resort's success depends on it.

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When your mountain gets over 720 inches of snow in a season, powder days become almost routine.

Blasé, even. You stop waking up early and hustling for first chair. You roll in late, glance at the snow report (another 20 inches overnight? No big deal), and don't mind waiting for your friends at the lift.

It's a stormy Monday afternoon in late February at Squaw Valley, and I'm showing up for my first run of the day at 2 p.m. KT-22 is deserted. Huge swathes of the mountain look untracked and the snow and wind are still pounding, rendering visibility nil and powder bottomless. The locals have either already come and conquered or they didn't bother coming out for their umpteenth powder day in a row.

I run into a friend, Katy. She's wearing a trash bag over her jacket to stay dry, her ponytail caked with snow. She says she keeps meaning to call it quits and head to work but she can't pull herself away. One more run, she keeps saying. I follow her into Rock Garden off KT's pinnacle, where steep, widely-spaced trees open up into an apron stuffed with so much fresh snow, I point it downhill, carefree and laughing out loud.

Storm after massive storm nailed the Tahoe area all last winter, burying chairlifts, turning roads into tunnels, and prompting the Squaw marketing department to dub the first month of 2017 "Januburied." Schools were closed for so many snow days the kids were stuck in classrooms until late June making it up, January power outages left houses on Lake Tahoe's west shore in the dark for over a week, and record-breaking amounts of precipitation led water experts to officially declare California's four-year drought over.

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If anyone forgot what a Tahoe winter could look like—snowbanks as high as buildings, snowplows cranking around the clock, and two-foot powder days stacked like dominoes—then last winter was a good reminder of the area's potential. But while Squaw skiers were gloating about face shots and digging out their cars, a deeper issue lurked beneath the surface, a controversial development project that's practically tearing this storied California mountain in half.

It's the same tale as many other ski resorts: Corporate ownership wants to build out condos and hotels, construct new shops and restaurants, and maybe throw in a waterpark just for the fun of it. They want to increase revenue by attracting destination visitors and create a year-round megaresort to compete with all the other shiny, amenity-filled resorts currently luring their customers elsewhere.

And the local shredders, well, they just want to keep their mountain as is. They don't care about fancy hotels or the bottom line. They hate

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the idea of waterslides at their ski hill and they want to be able to see the mountain from their drive in, not have their precious steeps blocked by a towering village. They want fewer people in the lift line, less traffic on the access road. They'd rather tourists elsewhere for their vacation.

The development that KSL, the Denver-based private equity firm that's owned Squaw since 2010, is planning to build at the base of Squaw Valley would be the biggest thing this mountain has seen since the 1960 Winter Olympic Games. It would add to the village that's already there nearly 1,500 hotel rooms, dorm-style housing for 300 employees, and a six-story-high, 90,000-square-foot mountain recreation center. Ninety percent of the development will be constructed on what is currently an 82-acre parking lot, according to Squaw.

Squaw estimates the project, which was first proposed in 2012 and could take up to 25 years to complete, will bring in $22 million in annual tax revenue to help fund things like schools and road projects, add 500 local jobs, and provide much-needed affordable housing.

Those opposed to the development disagree on many of those fronts. They say it'll turn the valley into a construction zone for the next few decades, strain natural resources, drastically worsen an already dire traffic situation, and add high-rise condos and a massive waterpark that don't fit the area's mountain ethos.

So how do these two diverging sides find a happy medium? Can a business that needs to secure its financial future also care about pleasing its touchy, don't-change-a-thing customers? Can resort ownership possibly incorporate feedback from the multitudes of voices screaming "do this, don't do that"?

And if you're a Squaw loyalist, a skier who was drawn to this striking valley for its varied, snow-laden terrain, do you deserve a say in the future of what you consider your mountain? You have two options. You can sit back and watch as the mountain you call home becomes something else entirely. Or you can stand up and fight.

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Nobody is eating from the baked potato bar at the Fat Cat Bar and Grill in Tahoe City when I show up for a happy hour on a stormy Wednesday night in February. The 30 or so people crammed into this tiny bar are here for a gathering hosted by Sierra Watch, the environmental watchdog organization that's been rallying the opposition to the Squaw village development.

These are the folks who showed up in droves in purple "Keep Squaw True" t-shirts for the nine-hour meeting last November when the Placer County Board of Supervisors voted 4 to 1 to approve the development. When Squaw CEO Andy Wirth took to the podium to plead his case,

the purple shirt brigade held up signs with the word "Deny."

After the board approved the project, rather than celebrate, Wirth went to Taco Bell for a root beer and a burrito, then got back to the business of opening the ski area for the season. Sierra Watch later filed several lawsuits to attempt to overturn the approval, citing improper environmental analysis and an inadequacy of the public process.

The vibe at the happy hour feels festive—there's cheap beer, raffle tickets, and trucker hats for prizes—but folks are here because they're disgruntled. One girl tells me, "There's so much animosity, I feel like I have to do something. People who've skied Squaw for a long time are considering moving because things are so ugly and divided."

Isaac Silverman, the staff attorney for Sierra Watch, stands up to address the crowd and update everyone on the lawsuits. "State law requires that these decisions be made by local governments based on reality, not on the wishful thinking of a private equity firm that wants to make money," he says. "We think our case is rock solid, so don't give up hope. But it's going to be a while. The legal system moves slowly. The good news is nothing is going to happen in terms of building all this crap—sorry, all this stuff—until they deal with this. We're not going to have an indoor waterpark until they deal with this."

Silverman will later tell me that it's not that they're opposed to any and all development. "We just want to see it done on a scale that's consistent with our mountains, that means limited mountain infrastructure," he says. "Doing things that celebrate, rather than replace, what we love about Tahoe."

I drink a beer and chat with a local firefighter who showed up for his first foray in community activism. But there's really just one person I came here to speak with, and eventually he walks through the door, wearing his purple t-shirt under his ski jacket. This is Robb Gaffney, a 46-year-old local psychiatrist and long-time Squaw Valley skier, one of the area's most vocal and outspoken opponents to KSL's vision. He's also the least likely person you can imagine to be staging a protest against the very resort that drew him here in the first place.

Gaffney grew up the youngest of three brothers in Tupper Lake, New York, a small town in the Adirondacks. He learned to ski on Big Tupper's 1,100 vertical feet. As a kid, he remembers getting his teeth cleaned while his dentist told him about his annual trip to a place called Squaw Valley, where skiers charged risky lines in plain sight of the chairlift. Gaffney's parents, who'd spent time in Tahoe before getting married, took the family to Lake Tahoe on summer vacations.

While studying pre-med at the University of Colorado at Boulder, Gaffney and his brother, Scott, and some roommates would road trip out to Tahoe for winter and spring breaks, and Scott would lug a huge camera everywhere to film his buddies skiing. (Scott would later become one of the premier cinematographers in the ski movie business, a veteran filmer for Matchstick Productions.)

Gaffney moved to Tahoe after graduating college in 1993—he worked race services for Squaw and picked up shifts bagging groceries. He delayed medical school for a year but soon went back to Colorado to get his MD, then moved to Davis, California, for his residency, which made it easy to spend his time off in Tahoe.

The '90s were a heyday for Squaw Valley. The Gaffney brothers quickly became part of a scene that included skiers like Scot Schmidt, Shane McConkey, and Kent Kreitler, who helped put the mountain on the map, scoring segments in ski movies and bringing a sense of style and flair to skiing that nobody had seen before.

During his residency, Gaffney penned a book called "Squallywood: A Guide to Squaw's Most Exposed Lines." It offered detailed accounts of the mountain's trickiest chutes and cliffs, lines with names like Chimney Sweep and Middle Knuckle. He mostly wrote between 9 p.m. and 2 a.m. "I wasn't able to ski, so I figured I'd write about it," he says.

He did, eventually, get back to skiing: He moved to Tahoe full time in 2003, at the age of 32, and took over the practice of a retiring psychiatrist at the base of Squaw Valley. "Squaw was this attractive force that you wanted to be a part of," he says.

He helped put together my ski movies shot at Squaw and around Tahoe, including 2011's "G.N.A.R., the Movie," a mockumentary that spoofed pro skiing by awarding G.N.A.R points (which stood for Gaff-

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ney's Numerical Assessment of Radness) for things like farting in the gondola line or skiing naked.

After KSL bought Squaw, Gaffney watched from a distance, seeing what changes would be coming. When the development project was proposed, it was not only the size and environmental impact that he disapproved of; it was how the new management rolled it out.

The initial village project called for 3,500 hotel rooms, but that plan has been nearly halved over the years. Gaffney argues that the reduction is part of the problem. "It was clearly an effort to mislead the public and the county, so that any reductions in the plan would make it appear they were working with the public," Gaffney says. "That's psychological anchoring in action—1,500 bedrooms feels like we got a deal compared to 3,500. Just like when the used car salesman says, 'It was $3,500, but I'll let you have it for $1,500.'"

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In 2013, Gaffney wrote an opinion piece for the local newspaper titled, "What Would Muir Do?" In it, he talked about his internal struggle to speak out against the development plan, while others felt like they had to stay mum in order to keep their alliances with the resort. Ultimately, he decided he couldn't keep quiet. Wirth, the Squaw CEO, sent Gaffney an email after that first newspaper story came out with a subject line that read, "I'm disappointed."

Gaffney couldn't be stopped: He became a board member for Sierra Watch, rallied troops to speak at public meetings, and in 2014, he made an announcement via social media that he was stepping down as a Squaw ambassador. (Wirth, for his part, has said that Gaffney was never officially an ambassador.) In 2017, when the women's World Cup circuit came to Squaw, the first time the mountain has hosted a World Cup since 1969, Gaffney organized a small protest and held up signs that read "Waterparks don't belong here."

"Working against a billion-dollar company is a big challenge," Gaffney says. "Money has the power to influence people. But the social consequences reveal an infection spreading and I wanted to be on the side of treating it."

I'm running across the Squaw Valley parking lot in my ski boots, late for an appointment with Andy Wirth. Tower 16—a consistent pitch below the tramline—was especially good after another overnight storm deposited a few more inches, and I had to squeeze in an extra lap.

I show up in Wirth's office breathless and sweating through my long underwear. Wirth moved here seven years ago for the CEO job from

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Steamboat Springs, Colorado, where he'd started as an intern in the mid 1980s and worked his way up to senior vice president of sales and marketing. He's a savvy veteran in the ski resort management industry, but in Tahoe, he's a relative newcomer.

The goal at Squaw, he says, is to improve the quality and variety of lodging to keep the resort competitive. He says community input has been a main priority—they've held 400 public meetings, conducted consumer research, and effected changes based on that input, he says.

"We've done everything we can to make everyone feel like this plan is their plan," Wirth says. "But there's a small group of folks who feel like they didn't get what they wanted."

Wirth says the dialogue about the project is fraught with ambiguities and falsehoods. Take the waterpark. "It never was a waterpark. It's not going to be neon orange and blue tubes. It's going to be an indoor/outdoor mountain adventure center," Wirth says.

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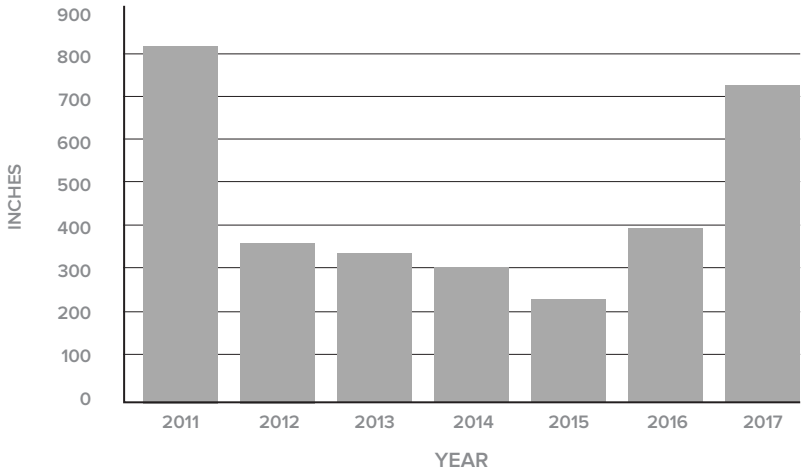
If it feels like a semantic debate, it is. It's also a massively complicated, emotionally charged one. "So much of the opposition is based on a lack of information," argues Theresa May Duggan, a long-time Tahoe resident who was hired by Squaw to be a community liaison. "If they only knew all the benefits that were coming their way. It's easy to say no. It's much harder to be informed and say yes."

"You're either for it or against it—there aren't many in between," adds Roy Tuscany, a Squaw skier who lives in Reno, and who, officially, is for the village project. "It does say something about our community. I don't think there's a more passionate group of people than Squaw skiers. We need to keep the heritage but it's time for some improvements."

There are skiers at every resort who feel like the mountain belongs to them, that they get a say. Squaw's no different. People love this place and want to see it thrive. But how you define thrive depends on who you ask.

"Mountain communities are made up of many voices," says Wirth. "I don't think anyone can arbitrarily claim to be the voice of this community. You take a look at the Keep Squaw True spokespeople and you scratch your head and say, 'Who appointed them Captain Community?'"

Tahoe's Snow Totals



It's nearly June and I'm still skiing KT-22. Sixty degree temperatures are serving up slush by mid-morning, but thanks to last winter's bounty, Squaw's promising to stay open until the Fourth of July, or longer.

I ride Siberia chair and hike to the top of the Palisades, an iconic gathering of elevator-shaft chutes that tower over the rest of the mountain. I bootpack up barren rock to get there, but at the top, Main Chute looks as snowy as if it were January. If a six-story-high water park—or whatever you want to call it—goes in at the base of the resort, you'll be able to see it from up here. But if I look the other way, I can see the shimmering cobalt water of Lake Tahoe and vast and rugged wilderness stretching west from the Pacific Crest as far as I can see.

Here's the thing about ski areas: While the real estate battles happen at the base, nobody can touch what we all came here for: the skiing. Wirth put it best. "Whether it's me or Ricky Bobby running the place, nobody can change the fact that this is a great mountain," he says.

Here, even Gaffney agrees. "This year, the place lit up with the weather," he says. "Enough snow can mend our wounds. Enough snow can bring the mountain to life. And it's the mountain that's drawn us here." ◉

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