

Frequently Asked Questions – Martis Valley West

On October 11, 2016, the Placer County Board of Supervisors issued final approvals for the Martis Valley West Project, a residential and commercial development project proposed to be built in the Martis Valley on land owned by Sierra Pacific Industries. The Martis Valley Project proposes 760 new residences and 6.6 acres of commercial development in a gated subdivision between Highway 267 and Northstar, on land adjacent to but outside of the Tahoe Basin.

Getting to an outcome that protects Tahoe and the region

Any development considered in such an inappropriate location — on pristine land far from downtown areas — would have to be very carefully designed to ensure it doesn't bring negative impacts to Lake Tahoe. As it's designed now, we're not there yet. There are clear improvements we will need to see to ensure this project can avoid harming Lake Tahoe's clarity now and for future generations.

The Martis Valley West project threatens Lake Tahoe

The project is inappropriately located in pristine forest with no current infrastructure. It would add numerous cars to the road and car trips into the basin. Traffic is already a significant problem in the basin. Pollutants in tailpipe emissions feed blooms of algae. Additionally, road sand used to make winter driving safer is crushed into fine sediment particles by passing cars. Such fine sediment particles are smaller than the width of a human hair, and are washed off Tahoe's streets and parking lots into the Lake during rain and snowmelt events. Once in the Lake, they remain suspended, clouding its water.

The environmental analysis for the Martis project, which was required by California law to identify negative impacts and propose solutions, found the project would generate about 1,400 peak day vehicle trips to the Tahoe Basin. The analysis failed to evaluate whether this added traffic would be "significant" for Tahoe Basin impacts, claiming the Project was located outside of the Tahoe Basin and jurisdiction of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Lake Tahoe is an important and sensitive resource, and developers and local agencies must analyze and mitigate impacts from additional car trips (also measured in planning terms as "vehicle miles traveled" or "VMT") to the Basin. These include impacts to air quality and Lake water quality.

The Martis project is even worse for traffic

A transportation expert for our organizations estimates that the vehicle trips from the Martis project would be far greater than the estimates that were provided by the developer and the County in the environmental analysis. The County's traffic analysis assumed that four out of five cars would never leave the Martis project site, which is unlikely given its proximity to a world famous resource like Lake Tahoe, as well as local ski areas and other attractions. The environmental analysis for the project also failed to evaluate traffic impacts to State Route 28 in North Lake Tahoe or appropriate measures to address the negative impacts it did identify: gridlock conditions on SR 267.

Other objections raised by the conservation groups and the public

- The Martis Valley West project is located in an area with considerable risk for fire, the environmental analysis classified the project location as a high severity fire danger zone. Traffic related to the project would cause gridlock in an evacuation, approximately 2.7 hours just for the project residents to evacuate, not including existing North Lake Tahoe communities.
- Some of the project's structures would be as tall as 75 feet, and some would be located along the Brockway Summit ridgeline, immediately adjacent to Tahoe Rim Trail. Many community members spoke out against the prospect of high-rise buildings visible from Lake Tahoe, or light pollution that would make it hard to see stars in the night sky. The developers did not offer any alternatives that avoided significant impacts. They are required to do so by California environmental law.

The project doesn't meet earlier agreements to attempt to protect land

In 2013, Sierra Watch and Mountain Area Preservation reached an agreement with landowners (SPI) and developers (East West Partners, now Mountainside Partners) to shape conservation and future development proposals for SPI's property in Martis Valley. The Martis Valley Opportunity Agreement (MVOA) called for a switch of development designations from the east to the west side of the SPI property and permanent preservation of the east side. The Martis Valley West proposal, however, is inconsistent with the MVOA. New designations were to provide the first step in a sequential process for potential development on the west side, with more specific development plans to follow – after the designations had been approved by Placer County. But SPI/Mountainside followed through with applications to Placer County and to TRPA that asked for more than the swap of designations called for in the MVOA; they asked for specific development entitlements – far beyond what had been agreed to.

The Martis project has faced widespread opposition

The Martis Valley West proposal has drawn large-scale public opposition, including from numerous environmental organizations, hundreds of community members and the California Attorney General. Opponents submitted over 150 comment letters and made over 90 public hearing comments, address numerous environmental and public safety concerns. The Placer County Planning Commission, in reaction to those concerns, recommended denial of the Project. However, the Board of Supervisors did not heed that recommendation and voted four-to-one to approve the Project. (Supervisor Montgomery, who represents the part of the County in the Tahoe Basin, voted against the Project.)

Conservation of land related to the development

Developers tout the project as a 'conservation and development' proposal. But the conservation component is unclear. There is no deal for land trusts to purchase and protect the 'east side' of the property, and the Brockway Parcel portion of the property is still subject to a development proposal.

The California State Attorney General has concerns about the project

On September 6, 2016, the Attorney General sent a, nineteen-page letter to Placer County. The letter points out the County's public planning process has failed to meet basic standards of state law, in particular its dismissive treatment of the project's potential impacts on Tahoe, traffic, water quality, and climate change.

Our groups are acting to protect Lake Tahoe and the region

Sierra Watch, Mountain Area Preservation and the League to Save Lake Tahoe have asked Placer County Superior Court to enforce California environmental law and overturn Placer County's approvals.

What was the Martis Valley Opportunity Agreement?

The Martis Valley Opportunity Agreement (MVOA) was a process agreement for open space conservation of the East Parcel and negotiations on appropriate development for the West Parcel amongst the developers, land trust partners, Sierra Watch and MAP. It was signed in late 2013, yet quickly unraveled when the developers announced their plans for a TRPA Area Plan for housing in the Lake Tahoe Basin in early 2014. The intent of the MVOA was to allow productive discussions and a seat at the table to negotiate large landscape conservation of the East Parcel for public access and a suitable development plan for the west parcel with meaningful mitigation for environmental impacts. The MVOA did not result in a collaborative dialogue and once the Area Plan, MVW Specific Plan and Brockway Campground applications were all on the table the conservation groups opposed the projects and worked to review the environmental analysis diligently in order to have a better land use planning outcome.