

Bear Valley layoffs send chill across Mother Lode

Struggling resort pivotal to tourism, nearby businesses

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BEAR VALLEY - After a wretched winter with little snow and too-few customers, Bear Valley Mountain ski resort this week laid off almost all of its year round employees.

The 19 people who lost their jobs were mostly maintenance workers assigned to care for the resort's lifts, buildings and vehicles, although some of the office staff also were let go, said Rosie Sundell, the resort's marketing manager.

The lodge, restaurants and other businesses in the Bear Valley Village area remains open and are hosting a variety of summer camps and events, Sundell said.

Sundell said that although the resort's owners still, intend to offer skiing this winter, it is not clear how or when that will happen.

"We do not have a set date for everyone coming back," Sundell said. She said only a skeleton administrative crew remains for the ski portion of the resort.

The layoffs have sent a chill through Alpine and neighboring Calaveras counties, where the skiers who come up Highway 4 to Bear Valley are crucial to tourism and real estate industries.

"It's a pivotal part of the economy," said Diane Gray, executive director of the Calaveras County Chamber of Commerce. "I'm hoping for many reasons it's just a temporary cost-cutting measure. We all recognize they had a pretty light winter last year."

In recent years, Bear Valley had been attracting about 140,000 visitors a year, Sundell said. According to an April blog post by resort General Manager Jim Gentling, the mountain drew only 75,000 visitors this past winter.

Sundell said Bear Valley also faces other challenges. She said ambitious plans in the works since 2006 for hundreds of new condominiums as well as a village -to- mountaintop lift have stalled.

"There aren't any shovels going in the ground right now," Sundell said.

In particular, working out a way to provide adequate sewage-treatment capacity for the proposed new condos has caused long delays to the expansion, which developers once said could bring \$200 million in new investment.

Since 2006, Bear Valley has been owned by a partnership that includes builder Chuck Toeniskoetter of San Jose and Colorado-based Dundee Resort Development.

Jeff Gouveia, general manager of Bear Valley Water District, said that this year his agency was able to write a letter promising adequate sewer capacity for the resort expansion. That came, however, only after the developers reduced the number of condominiums from the approximately 500 originally proposed.

Gouveia said that the water district can't expand sewage operations as much as it would like because of limited space. Nearby federal land is not for sale and the owners of the limited private land in the area are unwilling to sell, he said.

Without adding storage ponds and spray disposal sites, the district has no way to get rid of additional treated wastewater.

Another wrinkle: Even without expansion, the district might someday have to spend an additional \$3 million to \$15 million to build a so-called tertiary treatment plant for wastewater.

State water regulators last year said that Bear Valley did not have to upgrade to tertiary treatment. But the California Sportfishing Protection Alliance has sued state water pollution regulators to force them to require such treatment.

Gouveia said that suit might not be resolved until fall 2013.

"We all want this project to proceed as much as anybody," Gouveia said. "The district has done all it can, especially of late, to be benevolent and effective."

In particular, the recent letter from the district promising service should be enough to allow the Bear Valley resort expansion to proceed, Gouveia said.

"It is really in the hands of the development group, and they are not telling us a lot," he said.