

Troy Caldwell and his California interconnect dream

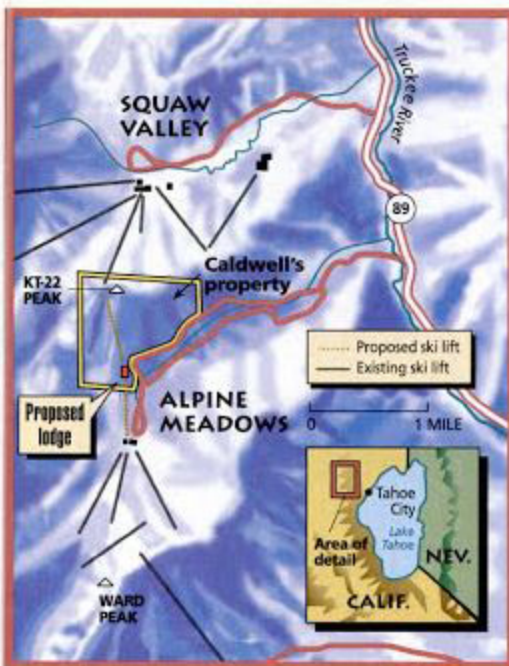
Troy Caldwell, a gentle-mannered former pro freestyle skier, has become the Forrest Gump of Lake Tahoe. The general contractor maintains a single-minded faith in the power of positive thinking, which has allowed him to pursue an idea skiers have dreamed about for decades. Caldwell is trying to connect Squaw Valley and Alpine Meadows, two of North America's biggest and baddest ski areas, by way of his own backyard.

"If the potential is there, it can come true," says Caldwell in Gump-like aphorism, walking near the house he recently built for himself and his wife, Suzie. In theory, his plan is almost that easy. If he actually pulls it off, it could be the ski coup of the century.

Caldwell's quest began in February 1989, when he approached Southern Pacific Railroad and asked to buy 40 acres of its land. The property sits on the Squaw Valley side of the Alpine Meadows access road, and Caldwell wanted to build a hotel there. But Placer County officials, who had to approve the sale, said subdividing the land would be legally difficult and time-consuming. So Southern Pacific instead offered Caldwell the entire 460 acres, which he bought for less than a half-million dollars.

As it turned out, Caldwell's property also runs up the backside and over the top of Squaw's famed KT-22 peak. It includes 75 acres within Squaw boundaries, land the ski corporation had leased from Southern Pacific for more than three decades and eventually intended to buy. But since April 1990, Squaw has instead rented the land from Caldwell.

Caldwell says he was simply in the right place at the right time. But Alex Cushing, the 81-year-old founder and chairman of Squaw, suspects his neighbor may have had an inside track. "It was extraordinary that Southern Pacific sold the land directly out from under us," Cushing says. "It doesn't make any sense. And when I asked them why, they clammed up. They only



The man with the plan—and the land—hopes to link Squaw and Alpine by way of his backyard.

said, 'We were not under any legal obligation to sell it to you.'"

Being Squaw's landlord gives Caldwell serious leverage, and he used it last summer. Cushing wanted to extend his lease another 30 years, to 2044. And Caldwell wanted a chairlift. At press time, a tentative deal was on the table: Cushing would sell Caldwell the old KT-22 double chair, which was replaced in April by a high-speed quad, for \$150,000 with no money down. A helicopter would fly the towers, cables and chairs over the mountain and down into Caldwell's yard.

Caldwell wants to run the lift up the backside of KT-22 and open a ski area called Whitewolf. He'll build a 52-room base lodge at the bottom and install a surface lift to haul skiers between the lodge and the Alpine Meadows base. Presto: A Squaw-Alpine interconnect, with 6,500 combined acres of prime Tahoe terrain.

Obviously, it won't be that easy. It could

take several years to procure the necessary permits, assuming no environmental opposition arises. And observers raise questions about the steep terrain on KT-22's backside.

"Most of his ski terrain is a red zone, all avalanche path," says Larry Heywood, the Alpine Meadows ski patrol director. Heywood conducted an avalanche study for Caldwell in the winter of 1989, when he first considered building a hotel. "It's doable with avalanche control, but he might need an avalauncher."

Heywood also cautions that only advanced skiers could handle the tough terrain, and that intermediates heading to Whitewolf from Squaw might have to download on Caldwell's lift. "There's an opportunity to get advanced intermediates through there," counters Caldwell. "And intermediates might be able to ski it, too."

Heywood's comments indicate the opposition quietly building at Alpine Meadows. "We have concerns about increased traffic," says Alpine marketing director Robert Olmer. "We'd like to see the lodge built, but Alpine isn't seeking to connect with Squaw Valley at this time."

Although the avalanche and traffic concerns are legitimate, sources say Alpine's real gripe is the idea of going into business with Squaw. The resorts have been feuding neighbors for decades, each the personal fiefdom of a fiercely entrepreneurial CEO.

But another Alpine Meadows administrator says resisting the interconnect is "just one man's opinion," a clear reference to Nick Badami, Alpine's 74-year-old board chairman. "It may not be the future."

For the time being, Caldwell's dream is on hold as he negotiates with the two resorts. But he remains optimistic. "Connecting these resorts would be an impressive marketing attraction for both areas," he says. Then he repeats his power-of-positive-thinking mantra: "The potential is there, and it can come true."

Forrest Gump couldn't have said it any better.

—Robert Frohlich