

Clearing Up Some Misconceptions About Royal Gorge Development Plan

By Mike Livak

Setting the record straight

A number of misconceptions about our development plans have made their way into the SLPOA newsletter or have come up at SLPOA meetings. I appreciate this opportunity to set the record straight.

1. Yes, we want to talk with you.

We remain committed to working with all stakeholder groups through open channels of communication and to sharing information as soon as we have it.

In March, we sent a letter to SLPOA reiterating our commitment to working together, listing topics where we are developing more specific information, and suggesting that we continue a formal dialogue when we have completed that work. Unfortunately, some people concluded that we don't want to work with SLPOA or to talk about specifics until they're finalized.

Actually, we want to develop more information so we can have an intelligent dialogue with you. For example, one important topic where more detailed information is needed concerns water supply. While the matter is being studied, we went ahead and shared information concerning estimated water demand and some ideas for meeting that demand. We initiated meetings with SLPOA representatives and other stakeholder groups immediately after we shared this information with the Sierra Lakes County Water District.

We also intend to provide you with further information about Ski Camp. We promised we'd come to you early, and we did so when we presented a concept plan in March, even though it was not a complete and detailed development plan. You had questions that we couldn't answer because we hadn't completed detailed planning.

Since then, we have been working on size and placement of buildings, number of units and architectural design for Ski Camp. Once we have this information, we can have an informed conversation with you about Ski Camp.

Does this mean that the specifics we present are final and are not subject to change as a result of public input? Not at all. We have a long road ahead of us, including the completion of an Environmental Impact Report. The EIR will look at several alternatives and will help us, and you, evaluate different approaches.

2. Protecting Serene Lakes.

Several rumors are circulating concerning potential options we've outlined for meeting water needs. We have prepared a "backgrounder" on water and posted it on the royalgorgefuture.com website. We are not proposing now, nor would we ever propose to harm the Serene Lakes. For example, the idea of dredging the lakes is nothing new and is patterned after at least two prior successful dredges—one in 1980, the other in 1969. Both were completed for the purposes of enhancing water quality, recapturing lost capacity and increasing storage capacity to serve new customers. The lakes as they exist today are the result of a dam and two past dredges that protected and enhanced recreation and did not diminish the lakes' surface area.

3. Water pollution, erosion, and runoff.

In a recent newsletter, the SLPOA Development Committee stated that Royal Gorge development will "result in a dramatic increase in hillside erosion"; pollution would "flow directly into storm sewers that feed into our lake water supply"; and "water supply quality will be compromised, the lake filled with silt, leading to flooding and eutrophication of Serene Lakes."

This scenario will not be allowed to occur because of today's stringent water quality protections. Current laws and the County's conditions of approval will result in storm water runoff being detained and treated in order to protect the quality of Serene Lakes and prevent flooding.

Unfortunately, Serene Lakes subdivision was developed before today's stringent anti-pollution laws were passed. Snowmelt and storm water runoff travel over long segments of paved roadway surfaces and through residential home sites where they can pick up petroleum products from vehicles, fertilizers, herbicides and pet waste before reaching the lakes. Thanks to modern design and best management practices, impacts of this nature will be minimized with new development.

4. We agree on what's important.

We held three public meetings in March. We solicited verbal and written comments and synthesized them into a report that was posted on the royalgorgefuture.com website.

The report reproduced verbatim dozens of comments and questions under categories that included traffic, Ski Camp, protecting Serene Lakes, timeshares, water, etc. Following the meetings, SLPOA conducted a survey that identified many of the same concerns that were communicated to us.

The SLPOA newsletter had this to say:

"First, your SLPOA Board was very gratified that the issues we'd highlighted following the Foster/Syme presentations: traffic, impact of Ski Camp, density, lake access for Ski Camp, second egress, and scale of Ski Camp, were exactly the issues pinpointed by the community in the SLPOA survey. Interestingly, the public did not think the developers' ideas: internet access, shopping, and a Sugar Bowl portal, were important."

One might conclude that Royal Gorge selectively chose to highlight particular issues to the exclusion of others, yet we actually agree with SLPOA concerning the important issues of concern.

While we did hear from many people that internet access, having more commercial space, and a portal to Sugar Bowl are among the desirable features of our concept plan, Royal Gorge and SLPOA also found similar public concerns, including traffic, preserving as much open space as possible, Ski Camp and protecting Serene Lakes.

Improved communication

In addition to this article, we are taking steps to improve communication with you. We have mailed a return-postage-paid card to everyone in our database for whom we don't have an email address. If you received a card, please return it. We are preparing an extensive Q&A, several "backgrounders" on important issues, and regular "Project Manager Updates." These will be posted on the royalgorgefuture.com website and if you have provided an email address, we will email them to you when they're available.

We will continue to reach out, to share information early and often, and to provide opportunities for you to share your thoughts with us. We will continue to listen to your concerns so that we can improve our plans. We understand that there will be rumors and misconceptions. If you read or hear something about our development plans that you have questions about, won't you please contact us and give us the opportunity to provide you with accurate information?

As the process moves forward, people will decide whether to support, to oppose or maintain neutrality regarding Royal Gorge development plans. Whatever position you decide to take, we hope it is based on fair and accurate information about our development proposal.

SLPOA's RESPONSE:

We Need The Real Facts From Royal Gorge LLC

1) **Real communication** requires Royal Gorge LLC to sit down and work with us throughout the development process- not to tell us "wait until we have developed more specific information, and then you can tell us what you think about it." Royal Gorge LLC should be seeking SLPOA's input *before* making big plans, not after. Real communication involves telling us real numbers- instead of pulling 46% occupancy figures out of the air to assess water needs, when Placer County, and now, California State law, require more realistic figures. Use the same numbers you use for Placer County, and be honest about water and sewer needs. If Royal Gorge LLC sincerely desires communication, then please release the Royal Gorge environmental study which was third-party reviewed by the Conservation Biology Institute. Mr. Syme told the Sierra Sun, "the science behind the report is sound." Let us know what the report told you, so we can ask you questions *now*, to help you shape your plans.

2) **Stop misrepresenting** the past dredging. Neither dredging was done to "recapture lost capacity" or "increase storage capacity to serve new customers". In both cases, dredging was carried out to remove aquatic vegetation. In 1969, only 3,000 to 6,000 cubic yards of vegetation were removed, nothing like the 96,800 cubic yards of muck you want to gouge out of the lake bottom (5,500 truck loads). The 1980 dredging, which involved draining and bulldozing the drinking-water lake, again, was directed at removal of vegetation, not increasing volume of the lake. That dredging, by the way, resulted in fines, and would not be allowed today without a raft of EIRs. There were only 200 or so cabins when that dredging occurred- imagine what a nightmare that would be today with so many more cabins! Stop trying to imply that Serene Lakes aren't "natural" because there is a dam. Not only do our lakes have a lovely, natural shoreline; photographs taken in the 1860's show the lakes looking very similar to today (see the photo on the articles page of www.saveserenelakes.org). We appreciate our lakes as lakes first, water supply second. They are not merely reservoirs.

3) **There is a very real danger** that water pollution, erosion, and runoff will harm our lakes because of Royal Gorge LLC's proposed development. The stringent antipollution laws, best management practices, and modern design Mr. Livak refers to, were in effect throughout Squaw Valley's recent expansion, and provided scant protection for Squaw's watersheds and streams. While Mr. Livak was in charge of development as Squaw's director of planning, the Environmental Protection Agency, the U.S. Attorney General's office, and the California Attorney General's office all intervened because of alleged extensive and repetitive violations. Squaw eventually agreed to pay \$900,000 to settle a lawsuit concerning water pollution. One wonders what the price tag on damage to our two small alpine lakes, and the watersheds of the South Yuba and North Fork American Rivers would be, and one wonders how money could ever fix irreparable harm (See "A Sorry History of Protecting Water Quality" on the articles page of www.saveserenelakes.org for more background).

4) **Real facts** matter more than opinions. If, heaven help us all, a fire like Angora breaks out at Serene Lakes, it won't matter what we think about the desirability of ski portals, or shopping opportunities, or brand name coffee stores, as we're scrambling down our one exit road. We're used to digging out from under a lot of snow, but please do us the favor of not "snowing" us with words. Don't label honest and heart-felt objections to your plans as "rumors" and "misconceptions", just because they don't fit into your marketing plans. Instead, use these objections to produce a development that is truly a conservation community, not an exercise in selling as many fractional ownership and time-shares as possible. We're a real community, with very real concerns about our environment, and we'd appreciate real "straight talk" from Royal Gorge, not manipulation.

REAL FACTS

- Dredging was done in the past to remove aquatic vegetation, not to increase capacity or to recover lost capacity.
- With or without dredging, according to their own documents, Foster/Syme's water usage will cause shorelines to recede more than 20 feet, will leave docks in the mud, and will leave much of the remaining lake too shallow to use.
- Serene Lakes only contains between 650 and 800 acre-feet of water, Royal Gorge's suggestion to draw over 355 acre-feet per year would drain half of the water from the lakes.
- The water district's first priority is the lakes' health and the projected needs of current customers and lot owners.
- The water district, with the help of hydrologists and other water experts, will decide how much water is available. Foster/Syme does not decide how much water can be used.
- The Foster/Syme lands are not zoned for the condominiums, duplexes, lodges and retail space that they propose.