

# Secret Snowbowl talks break open

CYNDY COLE Sun Staff Reporter | Posted: Tuesday, March 9, 2010



Kendra Enriquez Skiers ride on the ski lift to reach the top at Snowbowl Monday morning. (Kendra Enriquez/Arizona Daily Sun)

A federal agency is pressing the city of Flagstaff to offer potable water for snowmaking at Arizona Snowbowl that does not come directly from reclaimed wastewater.

In addition, Snowbowl could get government aid to cover the \$11 million in higher costs for the water over 20 winters.

Arizona's two U.S. senators are blasting the plan as a waste of taxpayer money and a violation of court decisions in favor of making snow at Snowbowl with treated effluent.

The proposal comes in response to tribal concerns that making snow with reclaimed wastewater desecrates the San Francisco Peaks, which they hold sacred.

Instead of making snow entirely with processed wastewater taken from the Rio de Flag Water Reclamation plant, Snowbowl would be tapping so-called "stored water."

That's water located underground and downstream of the Rio de Flag plant, mixed with natural surface and groundwater from rain and snow.

This "stored water" is already tapped by four 1,500-foot-deep city wells in the vicinity of Foxglenn. But instead of going to the city's water treatment plant for final processing, up to 1.5 million gallons a day would be diverted to Snowbowl for three months each winter.

## NO EARMARKS FOR SNOWMAKING SUBSIDIES

The negotiations, revealed Monday, involve city officials and the U.S. Department of Agriculture, which has withheld permission for Snowbowl to build while holding private negotiations with regional tribes since July in attempts to forge a compromise.

The Navajo Nation, along with other tribes, declined an option to purchase the ski area last fall, according to Snowbowl's owner.

U.S. Sens. John McCain and Jon Kyl blasted the U.S. Department of Agriculture in a letter Monday, though they each support snowmaking at Arizona Snowbowl. They called for Agriculture to grant Snowbowl permission to build "immediately."

"We oppose the use of taxpayer dollars to subsidize snowmaking at Arizona Snowbowl, and we will object to any attempt to secure an earmark or congressional approval of this project," they wrote.

They also asked whether the tribes that litigated to prevent snowmaking with reclaimed water would be content with this source of water.

"Have the tribes officially taken a position that they support 'stored water' but not A+ reclaimed water; and if so, on what basis?" they asked.

#### ATTEMPT TO STRIKE A BALANCE

Among the litigants opposed to the project was the Hopi tribe, which feared snowmaking with any kind of water could interfere with the home of spiritual beings and ancestors responsible for creating snow on the San Francisco Peaks and the rain on Hopi farmlands.

Hopi Chairman Le Roy Shingoitewa had heard nothing of the new proposal as of Monday.

The city of Flagstaff secretly proposed this "stored" water to the Agriculture Department in January in an apparent attempt to strike a balance between the use of water that was formerly in sewer systems and kitchen sinks -- an offensive idea to some tribal members -- and potential Flagstaff resident opposition to using fresh groundwater.

"This has been done for local political and legal reasons, as some segments of the general public would be very much opposed to using drinking-quality water or potable water for snowmaking ..." a Jan. 13 letter from the city to the Agriculture Department reads.

Using such a water source would also nullify an ongoing lawsuit that calls into question the safety of using purely reclaimed wastewater for snowmaking.

City of Flagstaff officials, who are bound by confidentiality rules in the negotiations, declined comment early Monday evening.

#### HIGHER COSTS VS. MORE JOBS

Negotiations on Snowbowl reach very high in the executive branch -- to the chief of staff and at least the deputy director at the Agriculture Department, if not Agriculture Secretary Tom Vilsack, to whom the senators' letter is addressed.

Snowbowl last year proposed to take legal action to force the Agriculture Department to allow construction of snowmaking infrastructure this spring following Snowbowl's legal victory in the courts, according to federal records obtained by the Arizona Daily Sun under the Freedom of Information Act.

But it set those legal tactics aside out of concern the resolution of the dispute would take longer.

"We are striving to come up with a solution that the tribes are satisfied with," Eric Borowsky, a Snowbowl owner, told the Daily Sun Monday. "We all know that those mountains are sacred to the tribes of northern Arizona."

He said there were many other options discussed that he would not disclose, and that Snowbowl was willing to split the cost of the more-expensive water with the Agriculture Department or the city of Flagstaff, citing the additional jobs it would provide for Flagstaff.

"Hopefully, we will be under construction within weeks," he said.

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