

# Potential fire copter preps for takeoff

By Kathryn Reed

Caldor, Tamarack, Angora, Gondola, Emerald, Davis, King. How would those fires in and around the Lake Tahoe area have been different if there had been a dedicated regional helicopter based in the basin?

No one knows for sure.

But what officials do know is fire season is a year-round phenomenon, no longer limited to certain months. Fires are burning hotter, are more destructive, and take more resources to contain.

Those are some of the reasons that regional fire chiefs are working to develop a helitack base in the basin.

"Over 40 percent of wildfires in the Tahoe basin are caused by lightning and usually they are remote," Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District Chief Scott Lindgren said. "A helicopter gets over it and puts it out. An example of that not happening was the (2022) Tamarack Fire. It would have been easy to put out with a helicopter, but the Forest Service allowed it to burn and be monitored, and then it became the Tamarack Fire. (If we had a helicopter), we would have put it out and we would never have heard of the Tamarack Fire."

Lindgren is spearheading the project that would bring around-the-clock helicopter fire and rescue capabilities here. He worked in CalFire's air program for 28 years.

So far, he has buy-in from 20 agencies in the surrounding area.

"I think the concept is a good one. One of the things we struggle with up here in the basin is air resources," South Lake Tahoe Fire Chief Jim Drennan said. "The concept is really sound."

A conceptual plan is in place to have the base in Zephyr Cove.

"Whittell High School sits on almost 60 acres, surrounded by Douglas and U.S. Forest Service property," Lindgren said of why this location was chosen. "A helicopter base is like a fire station without big apparatuses. It's just like a fire station, but instead it has helicopters."

The CalFire helitack base in Vina in Butte County, which opened in 2020, is being looked at as a model, with the Tahoe base projected to be smaller.

It would include living quarters, kitchen, workout room, lounge area, a helipad, and hangar for the birds.

"I would love to see it come to fruition. From a rescue and fire standpoint it can save a lot of lives and property," Lake Valley Fire Chief Chad Stephen said.

## Rescue and fire capabilities

For fire suppression, the helicopter will have a removable fixed tank underneath that intakes water through a snorkel from a lake or other source; it will also have a hook with a long-line bucket that allows for more precise water drops.

What it won't be is an air ambulance though the helicopter will be equipped to transport people to ground ambulances or an agency like CalStar.

At the base in Vina, a truck follows the helicopter, carrying 1,000 gallons of jet fuel. The helicopter holds 362 gallons, allowing for about six hours of flying time. CalFire is working on another generation of fuel trucks which could be beneficial to the local operation.

The California Highway Pa-



Photo Kathryn Reed

A large hangar is required to fit this Blackhawk helicopter, which is like the one Tahoe officials would like to acquire.

trol helicopter based in Auburn is most often the one used in rescue situations in the basin.

"Two summers ago, we requested a rescue helicopter in the Tahoe basin nine times and seven times we were denied because it was not available," Lindgren said. "We were denied by CHP because they were on other emergencies."

Hiking in versus flying to someone in a medical emergency can turn it into a life-or-death situation.

## Making it a reality

Lindgren wants the helicopters to be operational before the helitack base is built. He has a goal of limited operations this summer, then expanding hours, with a fully developed program as funding allows.

Money could be the most difficult hurdle, and it's the part of the process that most concerns chiefs Drennan and Stephen.

A new Blackhawk helicopter like what CalFire flies costs about \$26 million, while a military surplus refurbished chopper is closer



Photo Kathryn Reed

Tahoe Douglas Fire Chief Scott Lindgren is the point person creating the Zephyr Cove Helitack Base.

to \$3.5 million, according to Lindgren.

He said the Tahoe base is looking to acquire two or three used helicopters until enough funding is secured for a new one.

More than one is necessary to have a 24/7, 365-day operation. Maintenance requirements are

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Continued on page 20

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Rendering: Nichols, Melburg & Rossetto Architects + Engineers

This is a rendering of where the helitack base at Whittell High School could be located.

### Initial agencies interested in being part of the Zephyr Cove Helitack Base

Carson City Fire Department  
Central Lyon Fire  
Douglas County Sheriff's Department  
Eastern Alpine Fire and Rescue  
Fallen Leaf Fire Department  
Kirkwood Fire Department  
Lake Valley Fire Protection Department  
Meeks Bay Fire Protection District  
North Lake Tahoe Fire Protection District  
North Lyon Fire  
North Tahoe Fire Protection District  
Northstar Fire Department  
Olympic Valley Fire Department  
Reno Fire Department  
Smith Valley Fire Protection District  
South Lake Tahoe Fire Rescue  
Sparks Fire Department  
Storey County Fire Department  
Tahoe Douglas Fire Protection District  
Truckee Fire Protection District  
Truckee Meadows Fire & Rescue

Source: TDFPD

### HELITACK

Continued from page 16

strict, so the helicopters are periodically out of service.

Plus, pilots are limited in their flying time, so that will be a staffing consideration. A Blackhawk crew is usually 10-11 people, but it can fit 14.

The primary helicopter would always be available in the region, while the others could be deployed to fires elsewhere.

"Most of the money will come from donations in the region initially. Then from there, part of our business plan is to do a lot of contract work with other agencies, corporate sponsors," Lindgren

said. "For instance, the power companies use helicopters all the time for slinging poles and wire."

To date, Lindgren has secured about \$2 million in donations, which are tax deductible because of the nonprofit established through the Parasol Tahoe Community Foundation.

Federal and state grants are another potential revenue source, as is contracting with CalFire, the U.S. Forest Service and the Nevada Division of Forestry.

Eventually, a joint powers authority with a board of directors would be created to manage the helitack operation.

Still needed is formal approval from the Douglas County

School District for the helitack base to be built on their land. The county and Federal Aviation Administration will also have a say.

An FAA spokesperson only said, "The FAA has guidance on heliport design and qualification which outlines how to construct a heliport that meets regulatory requirements."

The sole FAA registered heliport in Douglas County is at Carson Valley Medical Center in Gardnerville.

Meg Ragonese with the Nevada Department of Transportation said, "Although we do not have approval authority over new aviation facility construction, we assist with the FAA approval application process, conduct on-site inspections to identify any hazards or obstacles that may delay approval, and offer valuable safety-related feedback to those planning new aviation facility developments."

Permitting for a helipad

by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is necessary, with rules found in the Code of Ordinances. The bi-state planning agency would review potential impacts to the ten categories of environmental standards, which range from water and air quality, to soil, wildlife, and noise.

Lindgren is shooting for April to have 30 percent of the design phase complete, with the permitting process starting soon thereafter.

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Photo Kathryn Reed

The helitack base in Vina (Butte County) is the inspiration for what could be built in the Tahoe basin.

# Whittell High class all fired up

By Kathryn Reed

*Deploy, deploy, deploy.*

Those are some of the last words any wildland firefighter wants to hear. But in case that's the command, they need to know what to do.

Shaking out the green mummy sack-like shields, the students scramble to completely cover themselves, putting their feet toward the make believe fire.

"Talk to each other. Make sure everyone is OK," commands Matt Fogerty, wildland battalion chief for Tahoe Douglas

"I would love to see all the things you wouldn't see (fighting) structures," she said. After all, wildland firefighters get to travel.

Victoria Moore, 10th-grader, was surprised to learn wildland firefighters pay attention to wildlife and protect endangered habitat when it comes to fuel reduction and suppression.

If the regional helitack base comes to fruition at WHS (see story Page 16), the high school program could grow



Photo Kathryn Reed

Under the guidance of Tahoe Douglas Battalion Chief Matt Fogerty students Carson Remington, from left, Liam Roper and Ali Lane deploy emergency shelters.

Fire Protection District.

He is one of the firefighters teaching these Whittell High School students who are in the inaugural fire science class.

"If you follow the rules of engagement, you should never have to deploy the shelter," Fogerty says. In the nearly 400 wildland fires he has battled, Fogerty has never had to deploy his shelter.

Still, it's a necessary skill that can be the difference between life and death.

Eleven students are in the class. The goal is to offer a second level starting next year that will delve into extractions and traffic accidents, with the third year culminating in an emergency medical technician certificate.

"I'm learning a lot of skills. The knowledge is good to know in case I want to do this in the future," senior Jeric Bayani said. Nursing is his No. 1 desire, but he's keeping the possibility of a job in the firefighting world as a backup.

Sophomore Lily Davis likes the wildland fire training more than structure fires.

exponentially.

"We could expand the fire science to have an aviation program at the high school," Fire Chief Scott Lindgren said. "We could have flight training where they get their pilot's license, aircraft mechanics, aeronautical engineering."

Talks are under way also for dual enrollment credit at Western Nevada College in Carson City and are already in place with Truckee Meadows Community College in Reno. Lake Tahoe Community College is not allowed to give credits across state lines.

"Whittell is a five-star school and platinum AP school. This also gives some students who might not have those academic future goals an opportunity to get experience and training, and get into the workforce, and give some an opportunity to stay in the area," Principal Sean Ryan said. After all, this program will ideally be a feeder for local fire departments.

If each cohort of students numbers ten, the program will remain viable.



Photo Kathryn Reed

Whittell High School students get the feel for what it's like to wear a wildland firefighting backpack.

"As long as Tahoe Douglas is doing the instruction, they are covering our expenses," Ryan said.

Whittell received a \$135,000 grant from the state for materials, with Tahoe

Douglas donating a ton of used equipment.

Tools of the trade are everywhere in this classroom—including turnouts, helmets, boots, chain saws, shovels, axes, gloves, backpacks and oxygen tanks.

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