# Donner Summit Visitor Center Feasibility Study

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#### Acknowledgments

#### Donner Summit Visitor Center Economic Feasibility Study

#### April 2, 2018

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#### **Executive Summary**

#### Purpose

The purpose of this report is to evaluate the feasibility of developing a visitor center in the Donner Summit Area. Both the positive and negative impacts of a visitor center were evaluated, along with a high level estimate of design and construction costs plus ongoing maintenance and operating costs. An initial evaluation of possible development sites was conducted to determine the site with the greatest potential for success.

#### **Key Findings**

Since the completion of Interstate 80, the Donner Summit Area has seen a decline in visitor traffic and the associated economic activity. The area's profile as a visitor destination has declined as many businesses have shuttered their doors. Tourists do not take advantage of the amazing natural amenities primarily because there is no clear visitor center, way-finding signs or obvious entry point to the biking, hiking and ski trails on public lands. This report found that developing a visitor center on Donner Summit would help address a gap in visitor services in the area, and elevate a marketing or branding campaign focused on promoting Donner Summit's year round tourist attractions. A visitor center could also offer additional benefits to residents and local businesses like blight remediation and serving as a community meeting space for current residents.

The project team conducted 9 in-depth interviews, collected 163 web-based survey responses and inspected five potential sites for a visitor center. Based on stakeholder feedback and the results of an objective site scoring system, Tinker's Station was identified as having the greatest potential for developing a successful visitor center. The site excelled because of its proximity to area attractions and residencies, relatively lower development costs, revenue generation ability and the potential to best offer visitor services to travelers. The report presents a funding scenario reflecting the purchase and renovation of the property.

#### **Next Steps**

Should the Donner Summit Association, Placer and Nevada Counties or any other party choose to pursue this project further, next steps would involve a more in depth analysis of the recommended project site at Tinker's Station. This next step includes an agreement of fair market value with the property owner, complete renovation design and engineering, consideration of necessary site upgrades and renovations to the existing structure and detailed cost estimate for desired finish level. A determination should be made regarding the optimal level of staffing and services for the visitor center. Additional research should be conducted to determine funding sources for the Visitor Center's development and ongoing operations.

#### **Donner Summit**

#### Introduction

Connected by historic Old Highway 40 and bisected by the county line separating Placer and Nevada County, Donner Summit is comprised of an array of ecosystems ranging in elevation from about 6,500 to 8,000 feet, characterized ecologically as upper montane forests and meadows transitioning to subalpine in the highest elevations. For centuries Donner Summit has been a crossroads of the Sierra and today Soda Springs provides limited local services in addition to partially meeting seasonal tourist based needs.<sup>1</sup>

Donner Summit is one of the most historically significant areas in the western United States. It is named for the fated Donner Party, of which many members perished trying to cross the mountain pass during the 1846/47 winter. It was the site of the first transcontinental railroad, highway, air route and telephone line. Pre-dating all of these historic events by thousands of years, Native Americans summered on Donner Summit, leaving behind petroglyphs, mortars and projectile points.<sup>2</sup>

Before Interstate 80 was constructed, all traffic travelling over Donner Pass would drive through the Donner Summit area on what is now Old Highway 40, also known as Donner Pass Road. This regular traffic helped sustain a vibrant small mountain community and economy. However, after the construction of I-80 in 1964, traffic began circumventing Donner Summit, and the area saw a continuous decline in visitors and the economic activity they brought.

Today, Donner Pass Road offers breathtaking panoramic vistas of alpine peaks and Donner Lake. The rock climbing routes and hiking and biking trails that crisscross the area provide access to some of the region's best recreational and historical resources. The Donner Summit area holds substantive promise of greater economic health and enhancement of a sustainable high quality of life. However, after years of deferred interest, there is considerable blight impacting the visitor experience and there is little signage or other indication of how to explore these resources while visiting the area.<sup>3</sup>

#### Population

The Donner Summit Area is composed of several different communities. As of 2010 the Soda Springs Area had a population of 81 full time residents according to the United States Census Bureau. However, the second homeowner population is substantial with approximately 1,000 residential lots<sup>4</sup> located in Serene Lakes, Donner Summit's largest community. One concern for the region is a strikingly increased median age of full time residents. Since the 2010 Soda

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> <u>Soda Springs Area Plan</u>, p.1-5

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> <u>Donner Summit Historical Society</u>

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> Soda Springs Area Plan, p. 1-6

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> Soda Springs Area Plan, p.1-6

Springs' census, total median age has increased from an estimated 30.2 in 2010 to 49.1 in 2016.

# **Facilities and Attractions**

Although it is not as bustling as it once was, the Donner Summit area does still have a limited variety of facilities and services to accommodate the needs of visitors and the local population. The Sugar Bowl Fuel gas station is located on Donner Pass Road, right by the I-80 exit for Soda Springs. It has 2 public bathrooms along with the small store that sells snacks and some automotive products.

The Soda Springs General Store is west of Soda Springs Road and sells groceries, seasonal apparel, non-essentials and other convenience items. They also sell fresh deli sandwiches and pizzas for customers looking for prepared food to go. The store does not have a public bathroom but does have a private latrine behind the building for customer use. A major concern of the store's owner is the sheer volume of visitors looking for a bathroom at their site and sometimes relieving themselves at the side of the building.

The Donner Summit Historical Society Museum, located at the intersection of Donner Pass and Soda Springs Road, is a small storefront packed full of historical pieces, photographs and books. The museum is run by Norm Sayler, a walking history of Donner Summit who has been a fixture of the community for over sixty years. The historical society also maintains a "20 mile museum" made up of over 50 interpretive roadside signs on old highway 40 reaching from Truckee to Auburn. Sponsored by local businesses, each sign discusses historical information and nearby activities.

The Clair Tappaan Lodge is one of the last remaining lodges of years gone by. Built by Sierra Club in 1934 and named for former club president Clair S. Tappaan, it is one of the Sierra Club's largest and most popular lodges. The lodge offers dorm style lodging and meals for guests. It hosts a number of outdoor & environmental programs and other events and even offers 14 kilometers of cross country ski trails and rental equipment in winter months. The lodge also runs four backcountry huts in the Tahoe area that are popular with outdoor enthusiasts year round.



Well known for its world class skiing, Donner Summit's four ski areas are a major seasonal attraction for tourists. Sugar Bowl, Donner Ski Ranch and Soda Springs Mountain Resort have over 2,800 alpine skiable acres and the Royal Gorge Cross Country Ski Resort has over 140 kilometers of cross country ski trails. In addition to their trails and runs, Sugar Bowl is home to a resort village at its base, Donner Ski Ranch offers pub fare and drinks at the Old 40 Bar & Grill, and Soda Springs Mountain Resort has a snow tubing hill that allows non-skiers to still enjoy the snow. Though not accessible via I-80, Boreal Mountain is located two miles east of the I-80 exit for Soda Springs and offers alpine skiing, tubing and access to Woodward Tahoe, an indoor extreme sports facility. Although it is not as connected to the immediate Donner Summit area, its popularity draws lots of visitors.

With respect to summer attractions, Donner Summit is a major destination for hikers, mountain bikers, rock climbers and train runners. The Pacific Crest Trail (PCT) crosses old 40 at the apex of the summit and numerous spur trails and loops originate in the area. The PCT provides access to three popular high alpine lakes and historic sites. The areas ski resorts also offered a limited schedule of summer events and activities, though not nearly as robust as their winter attractions.

# Similar Facilities

In an effort to minimize the redundancy of a potential visitor center an assessment of other potentially similar regional facilities and their services was conducted. The geographically closest facility that could have an overlap in mission and services offered are the I-80 rest stops for eastbound and westbound traffic. The rest areas are located two miles east of the I-80 Soda Springs exit. While these two rest stops do offer some informational pamphlets it is clear that their main purpose is to offer travelers on I-80 a place to use the restroom, stretch their legs and take a break from driving. The rest stops are often over run by semi-trucks and not an inviting place for tourists to spend any length of time.



Furthermore, since the rest stop for eastbound travelers is located east of the I-80 exit for Soda Springs, any travelers that may learn about Donner Summit or Old Highway 40 that wanted to take the scenic route to Truckee would find it inconvenient to access. After leaving the rest area travelers would need to continue east another 4 miles and get off at

the Donner Lake interchange exit, and then backtrack westward up to Donner Summit. Westbound travelers that might learn about Donner Summit face a similar access issue, but not as severe, since the I-80 exit for Soda Springs is west of the rest area, but once exiting I-80 they would need to travel east to get to Soda Springs or the eastern side of Donner Summit.

The Truckee California Welcome Center is located in historic downtown Truckee. The Welcome Center has information on local attractions and businesses, as well as different California regional attractions. The number of visitors to the Welcome Center has grown substantially in recent years, increasing 257% from 2010 - 2018, to its current annual total of

nearly 235,000 visitors. The center receives the most visitors from July through September. A recent visit to the Welcome Center to survey Donner Summit materials yielded only a couple of brochures relevant to Donner Summit attractions. According to staff, the center gets a lot of visitors asking questions about Donner Summit and the Donner Party history and offers a couple of informational handouts. Staff often direct visitors looking for more information to Donner Memorial State Park on the west side of Truckee.

Donner Memorial State Park is located at the east end of Donner Lake, just west of the I-80 exit 188. The park offers summer visitors opportunities for camping, picnicking, boating, fishing and hiking. In the winter, visitors are able to cross-country ski and snowshoe on the park's trails. The park's Visitor Center is host to a museum with educational exhibits on local ecology and history and also offers practical information about the park.

State Park Visitor Center staff mentioned that they get many visitors asking for directions to different trailheads and attractions on Donner Summit. They commented that it would be useful if there were somewhere on Donner Summit that could provide additional guidance to visitors since staff aren't always certain of the locations of different attractions. In 2018, Donner Memorial State Park had a total of nearly 185,000 single day visitors. Of those visitors over more than 76,000 visited during the weekend. Summer was the busiest time for the park with July being the peak month totaling over 48,000 total single day visitors.

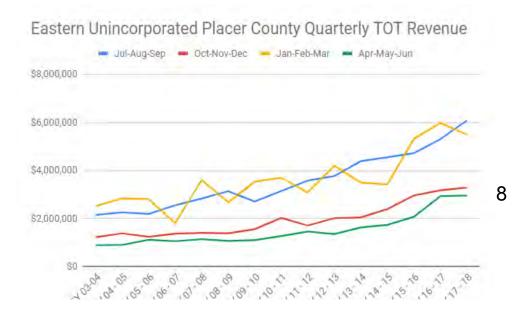
In the course of interviewing area stakeholders, a point was raised that highlighted a gap in services that a visitor center could fill. During its heyday, Donners Summit had a number of active visitor lodges with small restaurants and cafes inside. These lodges acted as informal visitor centers since guests staying at the lodge or that had stopped to eat could ask hotel and restaurant staff for recommendations of nearby activities and attractions. Since the majority of these lodges are no longer operational, it has left a gap in services for visitors to Donner Summit. A visitor center would help to meet this need for visitor guidance and informational services.

# **Current Visitation**

A large portion of Donner Summit's economy is fueled by both single day and overnight visitors. Comparisons of regional annual transient occupancy tax (TOT) revenue and traffic counts on Donner Pass Road and I-80 can be used to observe trends in visitation to the region.

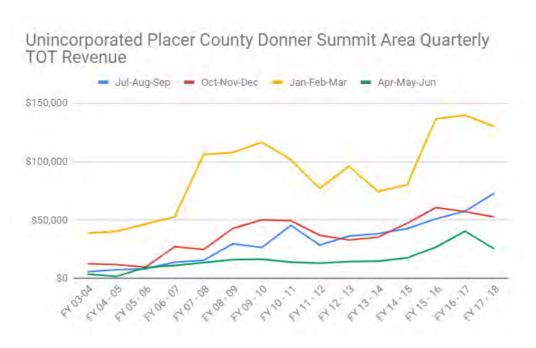
# Short Term Rental Trends

Eastern unincorporated Placer County has seen a strong and fairly consistent growth in TOT revenues from 2003 to 2018, with a net

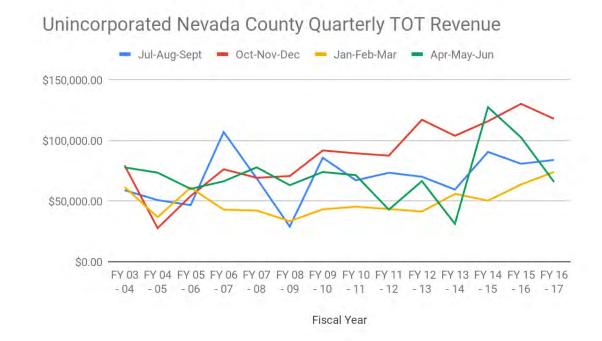


growth of 163% (see Appendix A). A quarterly analysis shows that TOT revenues have grown somewhat consistently, albeit at different rates, in all quarters, with Q1 (Jul-Aug-Sep) and Q3 (Jan-Feb-Mar) consistently grossing the highest revenues. It should be noted that third quarter revenues are more volatile. This could be, in part, because winter short term rental demand in the area is linked to the variable snowfall and ski conditions. One possible factor contributing to this increase could be more properties rented on AirBnB and VRBO being brought into compliance by Placer County enforcement.

Focusing in on the Donner Summit area of Eastern Placer County, the area has seen a large increase in annual TOT revenues from 2003 to 2018, with a net increase of 361% (see Appendix A). A quarterly analysis shows a net increase in TOT revenues for each quarter as well and clearly distinguishes the third quarter as the primary season for overnight visitors. This large distinction between tourist



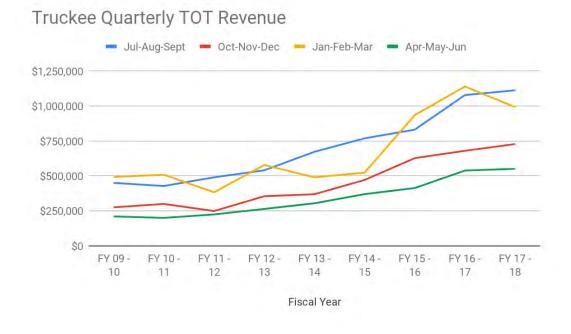
seasons highlights an opportunity to develop tourism during existing shoulder seasons, a strategy that would improve the resiliency of the area's economy as climate change starts leading to warmer winters with less snow. Doing so would align with the Soda Springs Area Plan's recommended *"…need for comprehensive marketing and promotion of all of Donner Summit for year-round tourism. Signage identifying the many recreational opportunities the area affords would be helpful in branding the area"<sup>5</sup>* 



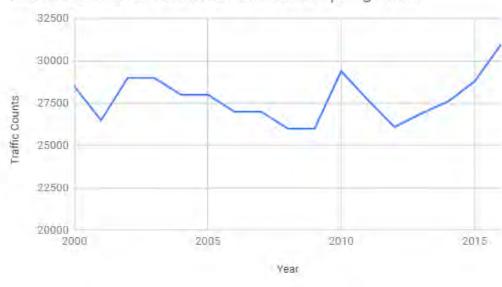
Unincorporated Nevada County has shown a less consistent growth in TOT revenues, with a net growth of 59% from 2003 through 2017 (see Appendix A). A quarterly analysis shows that quarter 2 (Oct-Nov-Dec) is the only quarter in which TOT revenues have grown somewhat consistently.

<sup>5</sup> Soda Spring Area Plan, p.3-2,3

Like Placer County, the Town of Truckee has shown fairly consistent growth in TOT revenues collected, with a net growth of 136% from 2009 through 2018 (see Appendix A). A quarterly analysis shows that TOT revenues have grown somewhat consistently in all quarters, with the first (Jul-Aug-Sep) and third (Jan-Feb-Mar) consistently grossing the highest revenues.



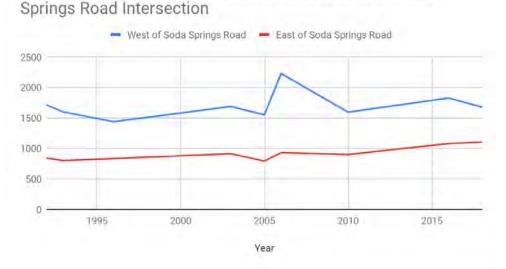
The overall trend for the surrounding region points towards an increase in overnight visitation. Given this trend in the region, there is potential to promote Donner Summit as day trip destination for tourists visiting the region. This would also relieve pressure on the heavily impacted areas of Truckee during peak tourist season.



# **Traffic Trends**

I-80 Soda Traffic Counts At The Soda Springs Exit

Aug/Sep Donner Pass Road Daily Traffic Counts at Soda



An analysis of annual average daily traffic for I-80 at the Soda Springs exits, published by Caltrans<sup>6</sup>, shows that the average daily number of vehicles experienced a stepped decline from 2002 to 2009, then experienced a strong increase from 2012 to 2016. If some type of signage for a potential visitor center can be developed along I-80, it could help to raise the area's profile to interested travelers.

An analysis of Nevada County's single day traffic counts for Donner Pass Road at the turn off for Soda Springs Road have remained fairly constant for over twenty years, with a few deviations. These counts were taken on a single day in August or September and do not take into account day of week or seasonal biases. As a result the data should only serve to get a better general understanding of the area. It should be noted though that during peak winter holidays traffic spikes significantly, and Sugar Bowl Resort places staff and cones at the Donner Pass-Soda Springs Road intersection to help with traffic control. These peak days are reminiscent of Donner Summit's heyday. In a discussion with local historian Norm Sayler, he mentioned that during one Fourth of July, before I-80 was built, traffic counts exceeded seventeen thousand vehicles.

#### **Community Impacts**

The importance of considering impacts to community members and businesses will be critical to ensuring the success of a visitor center. A center that is constructed without taking stakeholder input into account will likely not be welcomed by local businesses or residents, severely limiting the facility's potential to attract and inform visitors.

## Stakeholder Engagement

To gather initial community input and feedback on a potential visitor center an online survey was sent out with a monthly Donner Summit Public Utilities District bill. Pat Mahlberg and Bill Oudegeest also distributed to survey to stakeholders by email. The survey received 163 responses, of which 60% identified their relationship to the area as "Second Home Owners". Some of the notable results included a high preference for trail maps & trail head directions, historical information and public restrooms. Respondents' common concerns and objections to a visitor center included worries that a visitor center would lead to increased congestion and parking issues, worries about litter from visitor center patrons, development and operation costs and funding sources, and the need to avoid competition with local businesses if the center has a commercial component. A complete summary of online survey results can be found in Appendix B.

The public survey was expanded upon with nine interviews with stakeholders of various backgrounds to gather more detailed input and feedback. Several stakeholders stressed if the visitor center is to be successful it must balance visitor appreciation with preserving the area's small community feel. Stakeholders also agreed that public toilets would be important to include in a visitor center, but ensuring their regular cleaning and maintenance would be critical to the center's success. At the root of this concern was the point that it will be important to have a well-conceived general maintenance plan developed and agreed to for the Visitor Center. Donner Summit already has a number of blighted buildings and developments so it will be important that the visitor center helps to reverse that trend rather than contribute to it. One stakeholder with a background in real estate mentioned the importance of waiting for a preferable "buyers" real estate market before purchasing any properties to ensure the project would not be over-budget from the start.

Stakeholders also raised the point that there could be potential for incorporating a community meeting space in the visitor center, a much needed and desired facility amongst local residents. Doing so could help make any increases in traffic and congestion more amenable to local residents. Many stakeholders identified that the visitor center could be a key part of a larger campaign to revitalize Donner Summit. This larger campaign could include developing cohesive marketing/branding for the area to help Donner Summit develop its own unique identity and set it apart from nearby destinations, like Truckee or Lake Tahoe. One point of divergence in opinion amongst stakeholders was the impact of snow players on the region. Some stakeholders asserted that snow players cause excessive congestion while spending little money in the community. Others claimed that snow players are a valuable source of

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income for the region that spend money at local businesses, buying supplies for their recreational pursuits.

#### **Potential Visitation**

Based on the current visitation trends for similar nearby facilities, it is not unreasonable to

believe that a Donner Summit Visitor Center would see the most visitors during the summer months. A Visitor Center would likely experience a second spike in visitors during the height of ski season, since it would likely be located along the only road leading to four of the area's five ski resorts. If the Visitor Center were to receive 5% of the Truckee Welcome Center and Donner Memorial State Park annual visitation, the facility would provide services and information for nearly 21,000 people.

Truckee California Welcome Center Quarterly Visitors

recommendation was raised that the 💻 Jan-Feb-Mar 📁 Apr-May-Jun 📒 Jul-Aug-Sep 💻 Oct-Nov-Dec Visitor Center's success be tracked based on quantifiable metrics like the number of visitors to the facility. Stakeholders also pointed out that visitor usage could be increased year round if the center offered common amenities such as coffee, water bottles, sunscreen etc. This is likely true, 2014 2016 2018 however, two concerns emerge; the desire to not compete with existing

businesses and the need to hire staff for the center.

# **Residential Impacts**

2012

80,000

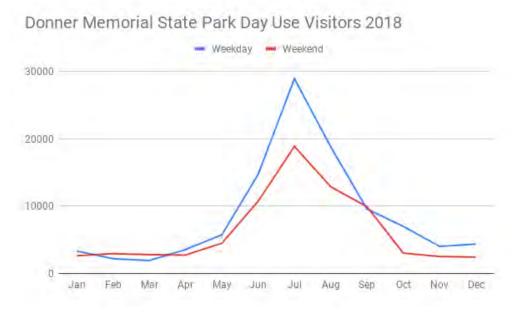
60,000

40,000

20,000

2010

The impacts of a successful visitor center, both positive and negative, will be felt by the Donner Summit Community. One area of concern that was frequently raised in online survey responses and stakeholder interviews was an increase in area traffic and congestion as a result of increased visitation. This increase in congestion on the area's roads might be more palatable for residents if the Visitor Center included a community meeting space. In an area comprised of somewhat disparate communities, a community meeting space could play a key role in helping to promote a sense of unity and place for Donner Summit residents.



In speaking with stakeholders, the

# **Economic Impacts**

The economic impacts of a successful visitor center would be overwhelmingly positive. A 2012 survey conducted by the California Dept. of Parks and Recreation determined that more than half of survey respondents utilized community facilities/buildings (65.4%), unpaved multiuse

trails (60.2%), and picnic table/pavilion (56.6%) during their last park visit<sup>7</sup>. A Donner Summit Visitor Center would be able to either directly meet this demand or provide information on nearby attractions and by doing so, attract more visitors to the area and encourage them to extend their length of stay. Additionally, research, conducted by the State of Colorado has shown that travelers that stop at a visitor center are more likely to stay longer and spend more during their stay.<sup>8</sup> If the visitor center is located strategically it could help to create a town core aesthetic and help drive economic activity in the area. It could also be combined with freeway signage and prove valuable to future marketing campaigns promoting the area as a year round destination. In short, a visitor center would literally put Donner Summit on the map.

The Visitor Center also has the potential to offer limited economic co-benefits by including a small co-working space for local entrepreneurs or employees looking to work remotely. Including this space in the Visitor Center increases the economic viability of the area while also providing a modest revenue stream for the visitor center to help offset operating costs.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> <u>2012 Survey on Public Opinions and Attitudes on Outdoor Recreation in California</u>, California Department of Parks and Recreation

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> "The 5 W's of the Durango Welcome Center", The Durango Herald

### **Future Possibilities**

#### **Potential Locations**

Six locations were identified as potential sites for a Donner Summit Visitor Center, with Tinker's Station identified as the optimal site to house a Donner Summit Visitor Center. The sites were evaluated based on their accessibility, development needs/costs, aesthetic quality, potential visitor amenities, impacts on residents and impacts on local businesses. These six evaluative categories were selected because they reflect the potential impacts of a Visitor Center as well as the priorities and concerns of online survey respondents and interviewed stakeholders.Each site was assigned a score from one to five in each category to help determine a top recommendation, as well as two runner ups.

Note: All images detailing parcel boundaries and measurements are only approximations and not official boundaries

# The Mason Parcel

The Mason Parcel is located on the south side of Donner Pass Road, approximately half a mile east from the Interstate 80 Soda Springs exit. The parcel is 1.02 acres and has a commercial building that houses several businesses, including the Soda Springs General

Store. There is currently no open space in the existing building, so unless a tenant leaves, the visitor center would need to be a newly constructed facility. In the winter, portions of the parking lot are used for snow storage that could limit parking availability. The resulting embankments from snow storage get used as unofficial sledding hills by day use visitors. These day use visitors end up leaving behind significant amounts of trash and litter since there is a lack of public waste receptacles.



#### Accessibility: 3/5

Located along Donner Pass Road, this site is easy to find for both first time and returning visitors. The site has a fairly large parking capacity during summer months, during the winter the lot space is limited by snow storage and tenants have complained about congestion from

snow player parking. This site is located next to several businesses, but is not located immediately next to any visitor attractions.

# **Development Needs & Costs: 3/5**

The existing commercial building at the site currently does not have any space available for lease so a new facility would need to be constructed if the site were to have a visitor center. If space for the visitor center were to open up in the existing building, it would likely need to be renovated to meet a visitor center's needs, especially since the current public restroom facility at the site is an outhouse behind the building. Of the two options, renovating an existing space in the building would likely be the more cost effective option.

# Aesthetic: 2/5

While the lot does not have particularly scenic views, it is far enough away from I-80 that it is not really impacted by its noise pollution. The site itself is a fairly plain with commercial building that shows some signs of wear and tear.

# Possible Visitor Amenities: 3/5

This site would be suited to providing local information for visitors. As an added bonus its colocation with the Soda Springs General Store provides a convenient place for visitors to buy any groceries or supplies they may need for their visit. It is unclear how feasible it will be to provide public bathrooms at this site since the facility at this site is an outhouse. Current tenants have complained about parking congestion and litter left behind by winter snow players that use the snow embankments at the edge of the parking lot for sledding. As a result a winter snow play area would not have local support. It is possible that offering a picnic area could lead to similar issues. There have been a number of instances where newly constructed buildings in the area have been unable to get phone or cable lines run to the new structure. If a visitor center is housed in a newly constructed facility at this site, it would likely run into similar issues. This would prevent the center from offering visitors Wi-Fi or a landline to call for information about the center.

# **Resident Impacts:** 3/5

This site could be suited to serve as a community meeting space, depending on whether or not public restroom facilities can be installed. The site does have some potential to increase traffic in the area and a high probability of increasing congestion, especially when the impacts of snow players are taken into account.

# Local Business Impacts: 3/5

Because it is co-located with other local businesses, and within the Soda Springs Rural Center, selecting this site for a visitor center could help to create a town core for the area. Tenants however have complained about congestion from visitors using the parking lot without patronizing businesses and could lead to a negative perception amongst local businesses. Given the uncertainty of phone or internet service at a newly constructed building, this site may not be able to incorporate a co-working space.

# Total Score: 17/30

# The Busby Lot

The Busby Lot is located on the south side of Donner Pass Road, approximately a quarter mile east from the Interstate 80 Soda Springs exit. The lot is 0.85 acres and currently undeveloped aside from a dirt road that runs through it and the "Donner Duck" stone cairn sculpture located on the site. The east end of the lot is bordered by the South Yuba River. The lot is located across the street from the Sugar Bowl Gas Station and the Sugar Bowl employee housing building.



Accessibility: 2/5

This location is right off the I-80 exit, making it easy to find for travelers pulling off of the freeway to access it. Travelers coming from the east along Donner Pass road will have to drive all the way across the summit to access this site. Parking at the site will likely be limited once it is cleared because of its narrow geometry and uneven topography close to the South Yuba River. Also because this site is located at the west edge of the Soda Springs Rural Center, it is one of the furthest sites from many of the areas trails and attractions. Winter snow removal would be challenging on this densely forested site as the access is on a sloping dirt road.

#### **Development Needs & Costs: 1/5**

Because this site is currently undeveloped and heavily forested, it would be very costly to clear the necessary land and construct the required facilities for a visitor center.

#### Aesthetic: 2/5

This site experiences unpleasant noise pollution from its close proximity to the freeway. It is also located across from the Donner Summit Fuel gas station and Sugar Bowl employee housing building, both of which could be seen as degrading the scenery of the area. The site's aesthetic is enhanced somewhat by the South Yuba River that borders it to the east as well as the "Donner Duck" stone cairn sculpture that is constructed on the site.

### Possible Visitor Amenities: 4/5

Since facilities at this site will be newly constructed, it is assumed that any new facilities will be designed distribute local information to visitors and provide public restrooms. This will also likely make it infeasible for the site to connect to internet or telephone. A forested area of the site could be utilized for a picnic area on the site. While the forested nature of the site could lend itself well to a picnic area, it would make it difficult to incorporate a snow play area.

### **Resident Impacts: 3/5**

Because of the site's close proximity to I-80, it would minimize traffic congestion in the middle of the community from visitors pulling off the highway to use the restroom or stretch their legs. This location would require visitors coming from the east on Donner Pass Road to drive all the way across the summit. These visitors will likely be coming to visit the area and explore its attractions rather than just use the bathroom, so they will be contributing to the areas value as a destination. Since the facilities at this site will be newly constructed, it is feasible that they could be designed to also serve as a community meeting place, the only downside being that the location is not centrally located.

#### Local Business Impacts: 1/5

Selecting this site will not mitigate blight in the area because it would be new development. By developing a new site, it opens up the area to litter from visitors that it would have otherwise not been exposed to. It is also located at the very edge of the Soda Springs Rural Center and would not help to create a town core and possibly even contribute to the areas lack of cohesiveness. Given the uncertainty of phone or internet service at a newly constructed building, this site may not be able to incorporate a co-working space.

#### Total Score: 13/30

# The Sugar Bowl Lot

Owned by Sugar Bowl, the Sugar Bowl Lot is located on the north side of Donner Pass Road. It is approximately a quarter mile east from the Interstate 80 Soda Springs exit and situated across the road from the Busby Lot and



next to the gas station. The lot is just over 4.5 acres in size and contains a large paved/gravel parking lot, empty restaurant front and employee housing for Sugar Bowl Resort seasonal employees. The property has a small park behind its buildings and is bordered by the South Yuba River to the east. During the school year the parking lot serves as a school bus stop and in the winter a portion of the parking lot is used for snow storage.

## Accessibility: 3/5

Because this site is at the western edge of the Soda Springs Rural Center, it has similar access advantages and disadvantages as the Busby Lot. The site's accessibility differs from that of the Busby lot in its parking capacity. The site already has a large partially paved parking lot that could accommodate a large number of visitors once it is resurfaced and gravel areas are paved. In the winter, a portion of the lot is used for employee parking. A portion of the parking lot is used for residents of the site's employee housing building in the winter. During peak business days, Sugar Bowl uses the lot for overflow parking and which could limit parking for non-Sugar Bowl visitors several days a year.

#### **Development Needs & Costs: 2/5**

While this site is cleared and developed, a new facility would need to be constructed to house a visitor center and its parking lot would need to be resurfaced. These development needs would add significant development costs.

#### Aesthetic: 2/5

The northern edge of this site is bordered by I-80 which is noisy and unsightly. The site is also located next to Donner Summit Fuel and co-located with Sugar Bowl's employee housing building. Both of these facilities are unappealing visually and do not reflect the area's natural beauty or the area's historical significance. The site has a small park behind the employee housing building and is bordered by the South Yuba River to the east, both of which help improve the site's image, but those positive features are overshadowed by the surrounding unsightly facilities and structures.

#### **Possible Visitor Amenities: 3/5**

This large, flat, cleared plot offers the opportunity to incorporate a several amenities. The small park at the back of the site could be used as a picnic area for visitors during warmer months. In winter large snow embankments from snow storage could be used to by snow players for sledding, but precautions would need to be taken to ensure that they are separated from visitor parking areas. Additionally, because the building housing the visitor center would need to be newly constructed, its need to accommodate local information distribution. Unfortunately, this could prevent the new visitor center from being able to connect to phone or internet a.

#### **Resident Impacts: 3/5**

Because of their similar locations, the site would have similar impacts on traffic and congestion as the Busby lot. The site could also serve as a community meeting space, but is not centrally located for local residents that may utilize it. This site is already prone to littering from gas station patrons and employee housing tenants, so special care would need to be taken to ensure that a visitor center does not further exacerbate this issue.

#### Local Business Impacts: 3/5

Selecting this location could minimally help mitigate blight if it results in the resurfacing of the site's degraded parking lot. This site is located at the very west edge of the Soda Springs Rural Center so it would do little in way of helping to create a town core. The worst case scenario for this site would be a furthering of the lack of cohesion between the area's different communities.

### Total Score: 16/30

# Beacon Hill Lodge

The Beacon Hill Lodge was one of the hotels that accommodated Donner Summit's many visitors during its heyday but, after it burned down in 1976, dwindling visitor numbers influenced owners' decisions not to rebuild. Since then the property has become overgrown, home to the old lodge's remaining concrete



foundation and a dirt parking pad. The old hotel's foundation sits on two parcels of land totaling 0.93 acres on the south side Donner Pass Road, two thirds of a mile from the I-80 Soda Springs exit. The South Yuba River passes through the southern edge of the property, with the union pacific railroad located further south of it.

#### Accessibility: 2/5

This sites topography could make any building that is constructed difficult to see from the road and also limit parking capacity. This site is not located immediately off of interstate 80, but not immediately adjacent to any visitor attractions aside from its views of the railroad and South Yuba River.

#### **Development Needs & Costs: 1/5**

The remaining concrete foundation and in ground pool would likely need to be removed from the site, and could not be repurposed. The location has also been a site for illegal dumping that would need to be cleaned up before it could be developed. In the years since the old lodge burned down, trees and underbrush have overgrown some areas of the site and would need to be removed or pruned. These necessities when paired with the cost of new construction would lead to a high development cost for a visitor center.

#### Aesthetic: 3/5

This site is out of view from I-80 and not impacted by its noise pollution. It is bordered by the South Yuba River along its back property and also a limited view of the railroad across the river for train enthusiasts. The historical significance of the site is enhanced by the fact that it was the site of the old Beacon Hill Lodge.

### **Possible Visitor Amenities:** 3/5

This site's topography could limit its ability to incorporate a snow play area or picnic area, to a lesser extent. Because of the site's historical significance, it could lend itself particularly well to providing local historical information. Because the building housing a visitor center would be new construction, it should be possible to incorporate public restrooms into the design process for the site. Unfortunately, being that the visitor center at this site would be newly constructed, it would likely be unable to get internet or phone connections under current provider limitations.

#### **Resident Impacts: 3/5**

This site's location is further from I-80 than other sites and so could increase congestion and traffic from visitors just looking to use the restroom and stretch their legs. Because the parking capacity of the site could be limited, it could also lead to congestion from people parking along the road. This site has had issues with illegal dumping in the past, and so care would need to be taken to ensure that litter from visitors doesn't contribute to this negative trend or take its place. This site's more central location is a positive attribute, facilitating community use.

#### Local Business Impacts: 3/5

Selecting this site would remedy a blighted sight that has struggled with illegal dumping. The benefits of this action would be compounded by the fact that the site is fairly centrally located and could help to develop a town core setting. That being said, this site is not co-located with other attractions or amenities like Mason Parcel or Flashing Light Building, both of which would create a denser town core setting.

Total Score: 15/30



# The Flashing Light Building

The flashing light building is located on a quarter acre parcel, on the south-eastern corner of Donner Pass Road and Soda Springs Road. The building currently has a commercial storefront that sells and rents ski and snow play equipment as well as a potential for a residential apartment unit on the second floor. The building has had many prior uses from a ski rental business to a fine cheese shop and is currently owned by Norm Sayler, a long time fixture of Donner Summit and proponent of the area's historical significance.

# Accessibility: 4/5

Located in the middle of the Soda Springs Rural Center, this site is the most central location being considered. The site is already paved and will offer decent parking capacity. With its central location, just across from the Donner Summit Historical Society Museum, the Flashing Light Building is only a short walk or bike ride from a number of trails in the Van Norden Meadow and Serene Lakes areas. It is also the closest site to the trail systems and attractions on the eastern side of Donner Summit, like the iconic Rainbow Bridge.

# **Development Needs & Costs:** 4/5

This site's development needs would be renovations and upgrades to the existing building and parking lot to ensure that the building is compliant with current building codes and ADA requirements and that if meets the needs of a visitor center. Because this site would not require any new construction or land clearing, it is estimated to have less expensive upfront development cost than other properties considered. The current building also has space on the second floor that could be improved for a potential residential unit providing a source of revenue for the visitor center and/or serve as employee housing for a site caretaker. If this course of action were pursued, additional renovations and upfront costs may be required.

# Aesthetic: 4/5

This site is located right next to the scenic Van Norden meadows. Located at the Soda Springs Road railroad crossing, this location offers excellent views for railroad enthusiasts. There is some blight in the immediate area, common amongst many of the potential sites, however, locating the visitor center at this site could provide incentive to mitigate surrounding blight.

#### Possible Visitor Amenities: 4/5

This site lends itself particularly well to providing visitor information since it is right across from the Donner Summit Historical Society Museum. The building is presumed to already be plumbed and capable of accommodating public bathrooms. With its smaller footprint, it could be difficult to incorporate a picnic or snow play at this site. It may be possible to set up these amenities at a nearby site but additional research would be required to determine this with certainty.

### **Resident Impacts:** 4/5

With the building's ample size and relatively central location, this site would be a good candidate to double as a community meeting space. On the flip side, because of its central location at a busier intersection, selecting this site for a visitor center would lead to an increase in traffic and congestion in the area, especially with only a flashing light at the intersection.

### Local Business Impacts: 4/5

Selecting this site for a visitor center would result in the renovation that, although not blighted, does show signs of wear and tear. Because it is so centrally located in the Soda Springs Rural Center on a busy corner, siting a visitor center at this location would make the area feel more like a town core, especially when paired with the Historical Society Museum across the street.

### Total Score: 24/30

# Tinker's Station

Tinker's Station is a 0.38 acre parcel located on the corner of Donner Pass Road and Lola Montez Lane, just across the road from the Mason Parcel. The former hostel currently has a large commercial footprint on the first floor, with residential accommodations on the second floor, along with an attached first floor studio unit. The building's current owner has made some renovations to the property, but a few more would likely be needed to meet the needs of a visitor center.



Accessibility: 4/5

Located less than half a mile from the I-80 Soda Springs exit on Donner Pass Road, Tinker's Station is easily accessible to travelers pulling off the highway. With front and rear parking areas, Tinker's Station can accommodate the parking needs of visitor center patrons, guests staying at the upstairs vacation rental or residents of the on site studio apartment. Although not located directly next to any visitor attractions, the site is located next to other visitor oriented businesses like the Soda Springs General Store and Castle Peak Vacation Rentals, with points of interest being only a short drive away.

#### **Development Needs & Costs: 4/5**

The building itself would need approximately \$250,000 - \$400,000 in renovations after purchase, which is low compared to the cost of building on an undeveloped lot. A portion of those improvements would be for vacation and residential rentals on site that would generate revenue for the DSA.

#### Aesthetic Appeal: 3/5

Tinker's Station is located far enough from I-80 to not be impacted by the noise pollution it generates. While it is not in an unsightly area by any means, the location does not offer any exceptional views that Donner Summit is well known for and the lot and building are of average appearance.

#### Possible Visitor Amenities: 4/5

The building's large first floor commercial space would be perfect for housing a visitor center. It already has a sufficient number of bathrooms and a small picnic area could potentially be built on the lot for use during summer and fall months.

#### **Resident Impacts:** 4/5

The commercial space's large footprint make it an ideal location for hosting community meetings after visitor center hours of operation. Additionally, the site would make available a studio apartment for long term tenants. The only negative impact the site might have for the area's residents would be an increase in traffic and possibly litter at the corner where the visitor center would be located.

#### Local Business Impacts: 5/5

Because Tinker's Station has struggled to fill its commercial space in recent history, a visitor center would be an improvement on the vacant space. The site's close location to the general store, vacation rental business and post office help add to the sense of a town core in the somewhat fragmented community. The visitor center space could also incorporate two coworking spaces in its footprint, helping to attract remote workers to the area and encouraging to extend their length of stay.

Total Score: 25/30

#### **Site Selection Recommendations**

After reviewing all the sites, Tinker's Station emerged as a top recommendation for developing a Visitor Center. The site's close proximity to I-80, along with other area businesses, make accessible to travellers coming from I-80 while also helping to create a town core feel. The site's low development costs relative to the other options, along with potential to offer a number of visitor amenities and community co-benefits help make this location the optimal and most realistic site to house a visitor center.

The Flashing Light Building was evaluated to be the runner up location because its central location makes it accessible to visitors coming from both the east and west ends of Donner Summit, while also helping to create a town core feel at the intersection of Donner Pass Road and Soda Springs Road. The Mason Parcel was selected third because of its close proximity to local businesses and easy access from I-80 but didn't excel because of its unclear and potentially high development costs.

# **Potential Operating Budget**

Development costs for Tinker's Station were estimated at between \$200,000 and \$400,000 depending on final specifications. These costs would cover necessary renovations to the building's roof, decking and handicap accessible ramp, among other things. The seller has made an exclusive, time sensitive offer to the DSA to sell the property for \$650,000. The seller is hoping to list the property for sale to the general public starting some time in the Fall of 2019 Donner Summit is unable to purchase the property. This would bring the total project cost to approximately \$850,000 on the low side with an upper level remodel treatment bringing at \$1,000,000.

Once a visitor center is developed, it will have ongoing operational costs and revenues. The Visitor Center's operating budget will vary depending on the level of service that the visitor center offers. Several California visitor or welcome centers' operating budgets were examined to get a rough understanding of what the annual operating budget could be. In 2017 the Santa Rosa California Welcome Center had an annual operations expenditure of \$191,000. Those operational costs enabled the Welcome Center to provide service to over 58,000 visitors. The operating budget was minimized by utilizing 2,700 volunteer hours to assist visitors with the added benefit of sharing local knowledge about the area with patrons.<sup>9</sup> It must be noted that Santa Rosa does not experience snow, so its operating budget does not include expenses from snow removal and other heavy winter weather maintenance issues.

Looking at a local example, the Tahoe City Visitor Information Center's (VIC) operating budget for the 2018-2019 fiscal year was \$487,000. This value comes with several caveats. The budget includes personnel costs for multiple locations' special events, seasonal summer staff

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> SRTBIA Annual Report and Work Plan

for the Kings Beach Visitor Information Center, and a manager level position that oversees additional departments. In recent discussions with North Lake Tahoe Resort Association CEO, Cindy Gustafson, about the Tahoe City VIC's operating budget, Ms. Gustafson expressed interest at the possibility of the NLTRA cooperating with the Donner Summit Association to aid in staffing a Donner Summit Visitor Center. Further exploration of potential synergies with the NLTRA should be explored if a Visitor Center is constructed.

A model budget was developed for the purchase and operations of Tinker's Station as a Visitor Center. The model's key assumptions include grants from Nevada and Placer County to eliminate the need for a debt service on a mortgage, utility and maintenance expenses based on nearby visitor centers' budget and historical expenses for the site, and an hourly staffing rate of \$15 per hour, with an additional 12% for payroll tax and workers compensation. The model shows revenue opportunities including an upstairs 3 bedroom vacation/ski rental, a separate studio apartment rental, retail sales of branded items and convenience items for hikers, skiers and bikers, casual to-go coffee sales, rental of professional desk space, conference room and ground floor special events. Based on these assumptions, the Visitor Center is expected to break even or become revenue positive within one year. The budget assumes that during the six peak months per year, the visitor center will be staffed six days per week (three 8 hour days and three 10 hour days) and during off peak months it will be staffed three days per week (ten hours per day).

Oper	ating Income			
	Rental Units	\$	43,500	
	Gift Shop	\$	9,900	
	Coffe Bar	\$	36,563	
	Coworking Space	\$	3,600	
	Events	\$	3,000	
	Total Revenue	\$	96,563	
Oper	ating Expenses			
1	Staff Payroll	\$	36,792	
2	Occupancy Expenses	\$	19,420	
	Building Expense	\$	11,800	
	Miscellaneous	\$	3,000	
	Total Expenses	\$	71,012	
Net F	Revenue	\$	25,551	
Notes				
1	Hourly wage of \$15 per hour 12% for payroll tax	with a	dditional	
2	Includes utilities, snow removi internet and office cleaning	al, pho	ne &	

# **Funding Recommendations**

The funding recommendations take into account the development and operating budget for partial renovation of Tinker's Station into a Visitor Center. The improvement considerations for Tinker's Station include the following:

- Repair and re-shingle the building's roof
- Repair the second story deck
- Repair the handicap ramp entrance to the building
- Ensure ADA compliance of public restroom
- Add a shared workspace
- Make minor adjustments to turn downstairs into a flexible information kiosk, museum, visitor center, retail outlet and community meeting space.

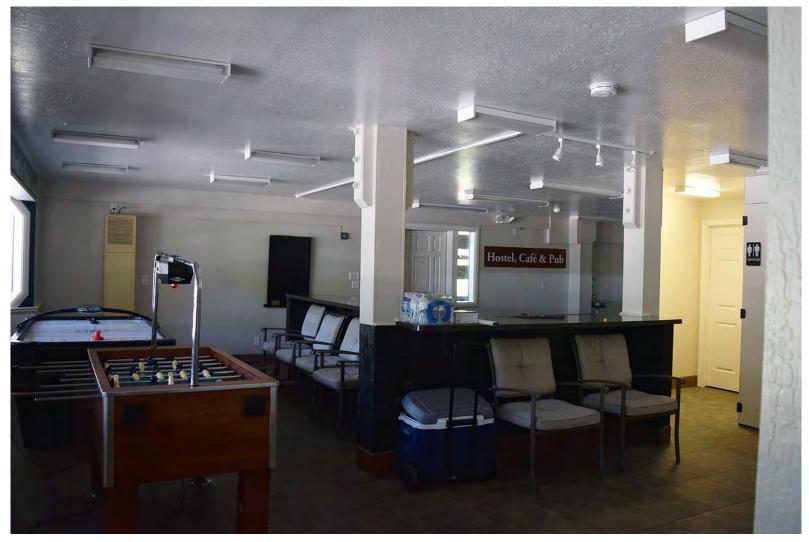
## Tinker's Station - Donner Pass Road Facing Storefront



Tinker's Station - Front Patio



Tinker's Station - Downstairs Commercial Area



Required renovations for the site to be operational were estimated to cost \$200,000. Other nonessential renovations could be made at a later date when capital is available to fund them. This brings the total immediate cost of the project to \$850,000. Assuming the DSA is able to raise \$65,000 or 10% of the cost to purchase Tinker's Station, grants from Nevada and Placer Counties totaling \$785,000 would be able to offset the rest of the purchase and renovation costs.

operty Purchase		Fundraising Strategy	
Property Price	\$ 650,000	Special sales price offered by owner	
Fees (Legal & transfer fees)		In kind & private fundraise by DSA	
DSA Fundraising	\$ 65,000	Private fundraise by DSA	
Remaining Cost	\$ 585,000	Multiple Grants - Nevada Co TOT, Placer Co CAP	
erty Renovation *			
Design & Engineering	\$ 18,000	Placer Co CAP Grant	
Permits	\$ 10,000	Nevada Co TOT Grant	
Construction	\$ 156,000	Multiple Grants - Nevada Co TOT, Placer Co CAP	
Contingency	\$ 16,000	Multiple Grants - Nevada Co TOT, Placer Co CAP	
Total Rennovation Cost	\$ 200,000		

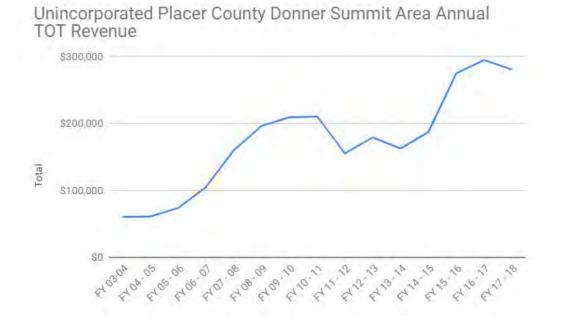
It should be noted that this project hinges on cooperation from the target property's owner and his willingness to sell within the budgeted price.

# **Next Steps**

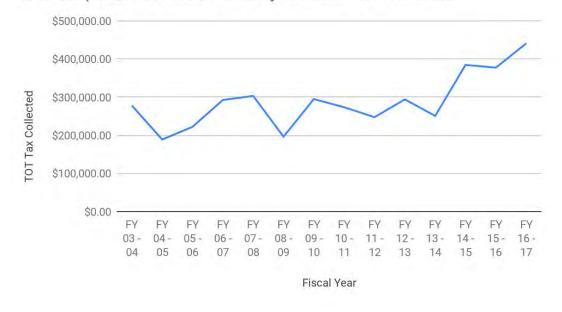
Should the Donner Summit Area Association, Placer and Nevada Counties or any other party choose to pursue this project further, next steps would involve a more in depth analysis of the recommended project site at the corner of Soda Springs Road and Donner Pass Road and pursue a letter of intent with the property owner. The letter of intent and assessments would include determining the fair market value of the property and detailed consideration of necessary renovations to the site and their discrete costs. A determination should be made regarding the optimal level of staffing for the visitor center, if any at all. Additional research should be conducted to determine funding sources for the Visitor Center's development and ongoing operations.

# Appendix

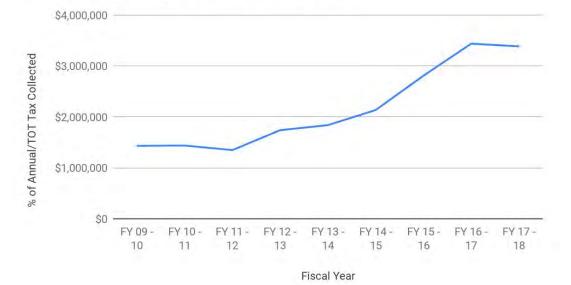
## **Appendix A: Supplementary Transient Occupancy Data**



Unincorporated Nevada County Annual TOT Revenue







# Appendix B: Online Stakeholder Survey Results

1) What is your connection to the Donner Summit/Soda Springs Area?

- More than 60% of respondents identified as second home owners
- 25% of respondents identified as primary home owners

2) What features/amenities would you like to see at a Donner Summit Visitor Center?

- High Desirability (>80% of respondents indicated)
  - 90% would like to see Trail Maps and Trail Head Directions
  - 90% would like to see Historical Information
  - 84% would like to see Bathrooms
  - Medium Desirability (80< and > 50% of respondents indicated)
    - 67% of respondents would like to see Picnic Tables/Area
    - 66% of respondents would like to see Ecological Information
- Low Desirability (<50% of respondents indicated)
  - 26% of respondents would like to see a Gift Shop/Convenience Store
- Notable write ins:
  - Incorporate visitor's center into a needed community center/event space
  - o Snowfall history and snowfall impacts
  - Bike self service station so road cyclists can fix flats, etc.
  - Running water for drinking
  - Bear proof trash receptacles
  - Signage reminding users not to litter and clean up after dogs
  - Adequate parking, especially in winter
  - Coffee shop
  - "We have a great history center there with Norm who is a walking history himself"
  - Use existing general store to prevent unfair competition

3) What do you think will be the most popular reason for people to visit the Donner Summit Visitors' Center? (highest to lowest)

- 1. Trail map information
- 2. Convenient restroom / Historical information
- 3. Information on additional attractions
- 4. Ecological information / Picnic tables/area
- 5. Gift shop/convenience store

4) Which seasons do you think the Donner Summit Visitors' Center would be most frequented? (highest to lowest)

- 1. Summer
- 2. Winter
- 3. Fall / Spring

5) What do you think would be the best type of structure to house the Visitors' Center? (best to worst)

- 1. Permanent newly constructed / Permanent existing structure
- 2. Non-permanent, newly constructed (e.g. yurt)

6) How often do you think you would visit/utilize the Visitors' Center?

- 26% expected to visit one or more times a month
- 56% expected to visit one or more times a year
- 9% wouldn't expect to visit the visitors' center

7) Summary of notable comments/concerns, including location (Red indicates recurring comments)

- Don't need a visitors' center because of congestion, concern about area degradation
- Worried about litter and dirty bathrooms
- Concerned about increased traffic
- Concerned about parking, car dumping / long term parking
- Gift shop must not be in competition with existing general store
- Worried about overcrowding
- Worried about cost of construction, upkeep and funding sources
- Concerned it will just become a rest area used for bathroom
- Start with non-permanent structure as a test and then go permanent if successful
- Similar name to Donner Memorial State Park could lead to confusion and poor search engine results
- Convenience store would be great for PCT through hikers
- Prioritize summit residents input since they will be most impacted
- Location. Comments & amp; Suggestions:
  - Existing building on highway 40
  - Visible from freeway, easy access
  - PCT Trailhead
  - Centrally located
  - Near or in historical society museum
  - Soda Springs with signage on I-80
  - Business district
  - On the Summit
  - Not too close to Soda Springs Junction
  - Near the store or old ASI building
  - "There used to be one near former Fire Station near Rainbows"

8) Would you be willing to volunteer to help with the planning or upkeep of the Visitors' Center?

- 56% indicated "Maybe"
- 29% indicated "No"

• 15% indicated "Yes"

# Appendix C: Case Studies

### <u>Durango</u>

Durango, CO is home to the Purgatory Ski Resort, Fort Lewis College and a historic narrow gauge railroad that still offers scenic train trips. In addition to skiing, other popular winter activities in Durango include snowmobiling, snowshoeing and dogsledding. In the summers Durango is popular for its hiking, river rafting, mountain biking and horseback riding.

In 2011 the City of Durango, Durango Area Tourism Office, Fort Lewis College, Business Improvement District and the Ft Lewis Concert Hall had the vision to collaborate on the Donner Welcome Center as a solution to the problems each organization was facing individually. The new welcome center helped meet the city's need for more public restrooms, enabled the business improvement district to promote more downtown businesses, provided the Fort Lewis Concert Hall a location to better serve visitors and gave Fort Lewis College a needed downtown presence to promote the school to visiting prospective students, while also housing the Durango Area Tourism Office.

By co-locating in one building, these different organizations were able to share operating costs that would have been prohibitively high for any single organization. Additionally, the complementary nature of each organizations' offerings enhances the overall visitor experience of the Welcome Center.

Offering public restrooms, water, ATM and knowledgeable staff, the Durango Welcome Center opened in 2012. The Center welcomed 100,000 visitors Durango's historic downtown in its first year and by 2016 attendance had increased to over 120,000 visitors. The center's success is further supported by State of Colorado research showing that travelers that stop at a visitor center stay longer and spend more.<sup>10</sup>

#### <u>Killington</u>

Located in central Vermont, the Town of Killington is a small ski resort community with a population of around 800 people. In 2008 an engaged community group identified "key challenges before the town, including a depressed economy, decline in cultural activities, lack of a sustainable year-round economy, poor communication and a strained relationship between Killington Resort and community members."<sup>11</sup> Working with the Vermont Council on Rural Development, a program of community engagement was developed to identify priority areas and create working groups to support unified efforts toward common goals. The four working groups focused on

1. Building a Killington Town/Mountain Partnership

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> "The 5 W's of the Durango Welcome Center", The Durango Herald

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> Town of Killington Community Visit Report and Action Plan, p.2

# Appendix D: Tinker's Station Site Photographs

Rear View of Tinkers Station



# Upstairs Residential Living







# Downstairs Commercial Space





