

# California ditches Empire Mine tunnel tourism project in Grass Valley

**Peter Hecht, Sacramento Bee, 2-13-14**

In Nevada County, this 850-foot tunnel into history was supposed to be the crowning attraction for a region whose heritage is gilded with gold.

In a project 23 years in the planning, the California Department of Parks and Recreation spent \$3.5 million so tourists could board ore-style carts that three 1950s battery-powered “locos” would pull deep into the legendary Empire Mine in Grass Valley. Amid the underground chill, and in a horizontal passage built in 2005 with steel beams and framing that soon rusted to an earthy brown, they were to travel into a mine whose 367 miles of deep shafts yielded 6 million ounces of gold.

Now it appears that all this heralded tourism project has yielded is a modern-day boondoggle.

State parks officials froze the project in 2012 because of concerns that corrosion in many beams threatened the structural safety; and they recently announced they will not spend more money on the project. They said it could cost \$1.4 million or more to make repairs, plus untold amounts in long-term maintenance. The endeavor is now considered dead.

The outcome has left Nevada County officials and members of the Empire Mine Park Association, a volunteer group that secured a \$600,000 state grant to support the project, frustrated and angry.

“When we got the word that this was being shut down, several of us had to manage our grief,” said volunteer Jim Dierberger, a retired architect and past president of the park association. “It was like a family member died. Some of us are still reeling.”

In October, the Nevada County Board of Supervisors passed a resolution urging that repairs be completed because the project would pay off in tourism with “thousands of future visitors.” They were to be drawn to underground displays, including an 1860s mining drift and grizzled-looking mannequins staged to depict miners and technologies from different eras in Empire Mine’s 106-year history.

As part of the \$3.5 million in state spending, the Empire Mine Park Association used grant money from the California Cultural and Historical Endowment to build an 1880s-style visitors center and ticket office, where tourists were to pick up their hardhats, raincoats and headlamps. The volunteer group, which was to run the attraction, also used grant funds to buy the battery-powered engines from a Canadian mining company for the underground excursions and construct a building for their storage and maintenance.

But a 2012 inspection report by the state fire marshal questioned the structural integrity of steel beams, which a private contractor erected every four feet to support the horizontal tunnel, called an adit, into the mine. State

park officials put the project on hold, saying as many as one-third of the beams may have been weakened by corrosion.

It didn't help that the project came to fruition as the state faced serious budget problems. Officials say the state parks system faces \$1 billion in unattended maintenance.

Last week, chief deputy parks director Aaron Robertson said the state had no interest in moving forward. "We just did not feel it was the wisest decision to spend additional dollars on a project where we didn't know where the end was," he said.

In rural Nevada County, the Empire Mine State Historic Park is a major draw that brings in 110,000 visitors a year, including 60,000 paying guests. They hike miles of trails, visit the gardens and regal English manor – the Empire Cottage – of San Francisco businessman William B. Bourn Sr., whose family took control of the mine in 1869. They tour the mine head frame, machine shop, blacksmith and refinery room and climb down a small set of stairs where miners used to descend deep into the shaft in a cable-operated "man skip."

For regional officials and park volunteers, the adit project and its underground tour into the historic workings of the mine was to be the crowning attraction.

Larry Skinner, a retired Del Monte foods executive who serves as president of the Empire Mine Parks Association, said as many as 200 local volunteers – "retired insurance people, teachers, airline pilots and salesmen" – had donated time to help make the underground tour a reality. Under supervision of parks officials, many helped install water lines, electricity and high-pressure air circulation to the adit, seeking to reduce taxpayer costs.

To the volunteers, the idea that the state parks department no longer considered the adit project worthy of its budget seemed incongruous with the legacy of a mine that produced gold worth more than \$8 billion in today's dollars. The Empire Mine association offered to spend \$50,000 for an engineering study on repairing the beams and pledged a fundraising drive to help pay for the work.

Skinner argued that the bulk of the corroded beams are located in a stretch of tunnel that is solid rock with no risk of collapse. "A lot of them," he said of the beams, "are not holding up anything but their own weight."

Last month, Skinner fired off a searing complaint to Anthony Jackson, a retired U.S. Marine Corps general who oversees state parks, saying the department was killing the project based on "unsubstantiated and erroneous information."

"This represents an enormous loss to not only the community and the park system, but also to the taxpayers of this state, who will have spent over \$3.5 million on this inaccessible hole in the ground," Skinner wrote, adding some italics for emphasis. "Is this really what you want us to do?"

In a Feb. 4 response, Jackson wrote that state parks across California face significant fiscal challenges and deferred maintenance costs due to years of state budget shortfalls, and that it wasn't prudent to proceed with a

project presenting “significant safety concerns.” He said parks officials had decided to stop funding the project “permanently.”

“Currently, the adit is unsafe and in need of critical repairs and ongoing maintenance,” Jackson wrote. “As stewards of the people’s state parks, the department is obligated to ensure the viability of cultural and natural resources in the entire system, as well as the public safety.”

Soon afterward, the Empire Mine Park Association put out a position paper. It declared: “The long anticipated Underground Tour at the Empire Mine State Historic Park now appears to be ‘history’ itself.”

The park association is trying to figure out whether it can salvage modest tourism benefits from the visitors’ center – where the mannequins are now packed in a closet – and the vintage-style maintenance building – where the parked “locos” and ore carts are unable to roll down the tracks into the new Empire Mine adit.

Recently, a county supervisor and park volunteers took a fraction of a tour into the tunnel that is to remain closed to the public.

“I understand there are challenges and budget priorities, but I hope we keep the door open on this,” said Nevada County Supervisor Terry Lamphier, who drafted the county resolution asking park officials to revive the project. Standing in the cool air, amid the rusted steel framing, he said: “It would be a good return for the taxpayers and very good for the local tourism economy. Never say never.”

A few dozen yards in, the delegation turned back. Due to structural concerns, state parks officials said, it wasn’t safe to venture further.