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NEVADA COUNTY BOARD OF SUPERVISORS
BOARD AGENDA MEMO

MEETING DATE: October 8, 2024

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: Jeffrey Thorsby, Chief of Staff/Clerk of the Board

SUBJECT: Resolution designating the Donner Cross, located in front of 12047 Donner Pass Road, Truckee, CA 96161, as Nevada County Historical Landmark 24-07

RECOMMENDATION: Adopt the attached Resolution.

FUNDING: N/A

BACKGROUND: On June 21, 2024, the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission (NCHLC) voted unanimously to recommend to the Board of Supervisors to designate the Donner Cross, located in front of 12047 Donner Pass Road, Truckee, CA 96161, as Nevada County Historical Landmark 24-07. On June 14, 2024, the Truckee-Donner Historical Society (TDHS) submitted an application, specifically signed by Gregory P. Zirbel, President of TDHS, to the NCHLC requesting the site of the Donner Cross be considered and designated as a Nevada County Historical Landmark. The TDHS is the owner of the Donner Cross, through an easement granted in 1979, and refined in 1985 “to display the historic Donner Trail Cross and the Graves’ Cabin marker.”

As outlined in the attached supporting documents, the Donner Cross was erected in 1887, the original Donner Cross was the first public recognition of the ill-fated Donner Party. The Donner Cross was intended to mark the site of the Graves Cabin, where some members of the Donner Party wintered during 1846-1847. There can be little question of its historical significance; the Graves Cabin site marked by the Donner Cross has been on the National Register of Historic Places since the Keeper of the Register signed the original application in 1961. The present Donner Cross is a wooden cross painted white and is believed to be the fifth iteration since the original 1887. The Cross has been moved at least five times to accommodate Truckee’s growth, especially the construction of I-80. The Donner Cross itself has experienced damage over the years. The intent of the application from the Truckee-Donner Historical Society is to help assure some permanency to the Donner Cross and its location.

The Donner Party history is well-known to this region, and the attached supporting documents describe how “the tragic story of the Donner Party occurred during the winter of 1846-1847 when a group of 89 California-bound emigrants led by Jacob and George Donner was trapped by the heavy snows of the High Sierra. Bitter cold and dwindling food supplies reduced the wagon train to a group of desperate individuals unable to cooperate, driven to terror and degradation. Four relief expeditions eventually rescued 47 of the party...” The original Donner Cross was one of the first or earliest roadside (trail) memorials found in California, and it serves to memorialize the tragic experience of the Donner Party.

As such, the Nevada County Historical Landmarks Commission recommends the Board of Supervisors adopt the attached Resolution designating the Donner Cross as Nevada County Historical Landmark 24-07.

Initiated: Carissa Cyr, Administrative Analyst

Approved: Jeffrey Thorsby, Chief of Staff/Clerk of the Board

Submittal Date: September 25, 2024