

Biking and Walking Bring More Than Clean Air to Lake Tahoe

By Joanne S. Marchetta

Lake Tahoe is biking its way to a healthy, more environmentally sustainable future. In the first two weeks of June, more than 400 people around the Tahoe Basin logged 13,800 miles and 3,800 bike trips just getting to work and doing errands as part of the Tahoe Bike Challenge. TRPA and the Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition have held this event seven years running to get people out on their bikes and to reinforce the commitment our communities have to multi-modal transportation, clean air and water. The data collected is used to help Lake Tahoe agencies make better decisions about biking facilities.

While there is a common understanding that TRPA is mandated to improve Lake Tahoe's air quality, you may not be aware of the inherent linkages among land use policies, transportation programs, economic strength, clearer water, cleaner air and healthier, more vibrant communities. I'd like to connect the dots for you.

Cleaner Air and Water

The latest science shows that most air pollution at Lake Tahoe is coming from local pollutants created here in the Lake Tahoe airshed. Nitrogen emissions contribute to the growth of harmful algae that is clouding the lake. The size of our paved surfaces and the number of cars on our roads also contribute to the load of fine sediment washed into Lake Tahoe through streams, storm drains and stormwater runoff. Fewer vehicle trips and better community design are critical to improving both air and water quality and the goal of regaining the Lake's famed clarity.

Economy

Thousands of visitors come to Lake Tahoe every year just to ride their bicycles. That's because Lake Tahoe offers some of the best cycling experiences in the West. Cyclists are estimated to bring between \$6 and \$23 million in local direct expenditures annually to Lake Tahoe communities. As Lake Tahoe positions itself in the geotourism market and begins to diversify its local economies with a focus on recreation, health and wellness, bike trails and pedestrian-friendly town centers are critical investments.

Community

TRPA has benefited from broad community input on the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan Update. One theme that we have heard over and over is the need for safer, more vibrant and walkable town centers. The current design of most of our town centers, with sprawling parking lots and dirt road shoulders, sends a clear message that we are built for the car and that you are only welcome if you're in one. The emerging vision of the Regional Plan Update is to support bikeable, walkable communities which enhance the quality of life for locals and millions of visitors.

You can experience this more vibrant model of community design for yourself. Tahoe City's downtown sidewalks and the Lakeside Trail along with the pedestrian plaza at the Heavenly Gondola Village show the benefits of safe, pedestrian-friendly town centers. The Kings Beach Commercial Core Improvement Project, which is scheduled to break ground next year, promises to be an outstanding example of our emerging collective vision.

How We Get There

TRPA is updating the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan and Regional Transportation Plan this year with a priority focus on more bikeable, walkable communities. Draft policies increase the connectivity of bike facilities Basin-wide. Others guide the form and design of development in our town centers to provide incentives for property owners to improve their street frontage, share parking, create storefronts that engage pedestrians, and contribute to transit stops and bike lanes along the roadway. Property owners considering redevelopment will have real incentives to redesign our built environment in a way that doesn't revolve strictly around the car and that contributes to the vitality of our region.

There is no innovation without implementation. We are gathering specialists and experts in Tahoe this month to discuss what it takes for communities to reduce reliance on the private automobile. On July 25 and 26, we have guest speakers in town from Park City, Utah, a resort town similar to Lake Tahoe which managed the transportation needs of the 2002 Winter Olympic Games, and from Portland, Oregon, a region that has transformed itself into one of the most bicycle-friendly places in the nation. We hope you can come out to hear from these experts.

If you want to learn about the strategies, challenges and solutions to improving our quality of life and environment, visit www.trpa.org and plan to attend one of the upcoming educational opportunities on July 25th and 26th taking place on the south and north shores.

--Joanne S. Marchetta is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.