

Planning a Remodel Gets Easier and Helps Save the Lake

By Joanne S. Marchetta

Can I help save Lake Tahoe and also improve my home? Now, the answer is yes and here is how: Before the first nail is pounded, before the first coat of paint goes on, many simple home improvement projects have already started helping protect Lake Tahoe. That's because water quality Best Management Practices (BMPs) to minimize stormwater pollution and erosion are required with every significant remodel or house addition project.

Leading up to the 2012 Lake Tahoe Regional Plan Update, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency heard loud and clear that simplified land coverage rules were needed to keep many of these lake-saving projects moving forward. We listened, and through hard-fought compromise, we've made a start at making coverage rules more user-friendly. New land coverage exemptions are now in effect that give a break to many homeowners who have installed their BMPs and could make a small addition to your Tahoe home possible.

Here are the basics. The water quality plan for Lake Tahoe is innovative because it is based on soil protection. What happens on the land affects Tahoe's water, so requiring a certain amount of open space on every parcel is a cornerstone of the water quality plan. The rest of the parcel can be covered with structures or pavement, called land coverage, as long as the soil on the property is considered non-sensitive. In the past, home improvement projects were blocked on some parcels because there was already too much coverage. Now, the new rules encourage small home improvements and additions by exempting certain permitted structures and surfaces from a parcel's land coverage limit with a BMP completion certificate.

Any property owner in the Basin can protect Lake Tahoe and help restore its lost clarity by installing water quality BMPs. Science shows that 72 percent of the fine sediment entering Lake Tahoe is from stormwater runoff from our homes, roads and businesses. Most property owners choose to install and certify their BMPs only during a renovation project, so the more home improvement projects completed, the cleaner the lake gets. The new regulations will improve water quality by encouraging more small projects that include BMPs. This is part of the incentive-based approach to environmental improvements TRPA is implementing in the new Regional Plan.

To help you understand what types of structures are exempt and how to find out if these exemptions can be used on your property, TRPA has put together a helpful information packet available at your local building department and trpa.org. In many cases, your local government planning department will be able to permit your exemption on TRPA's behalf because of agreements in place that streamline the permit process. Regardless of where you apply for your exemption, the primary starting point is your parcel's land capability and amount of existing coverage. If you haven't had either of these verified by TRPA, you will need to apply for a Site Assessment as soon as possible to help move your project forward.

For many property owners, a deck or room addition that couldn't be built before due to lack of coverage may now be possible. Since there are approximately 25,000 properties remaining in the Lake Tahoe Basin that do not have a BMP completion certificate, this could lead to many more homeowners doing their part to improve Lake Tahoe's clarity.

TRPA is moving forward to implement the updated Regional Plan. Land coverage exemptions for homeowners are only a part of it. The new rules also support other environmental benefits such as encouraging more bike trails by exempting them from land coverage mitigation requirements and encouraging restoration of sensitive Stream Environment Zones. When implemented, the plan is projected to eliminate 10,000 vehicle miles traveled annually in the Tahoe Basin.

So when you sit down to start planning that remodel or addition, take some time to find out about the new land coverage exemptions that may be available for your property and remember these new exemptions are part of what you can do to protect and restore Lake Tahoe.

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