

A New Plan for Tahoe: It's For the Lake

By Joanne S. Marchetta

The Tahoe Basin took a big step forward on 12.12.12 when the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approved the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan. Without this plan, the next quantum leap of environmental gain would be impossible.

The essence of environmental restoration at Tahoe can be boiled down to a simple fact: what happens on the land affects the clarity of the lake's waters. Soft, granular soils allow nutrients, some from over-fertilized lawns, to seep into the Lake, spurring algae growth in shoreline areas. Tailpipe emissions, wood smoke and road dust are trapped in the Basin by a towering ring of mountain peaks, forcing them down into the water. Most importantly, for more than half a century, most of the fine sediment that has clouded Lake Tahoe's famously clear water has been continually carried from buildings, driveways, parking lots and roadways by rain storms and snow melt. Protecting and restoring this fragile ecosystem is the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's (TRPA's) central mission and I want to share with you some basic facts about updates to the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan that were recently approved by our board.

Any decent water quality plan for Lake Tahoe -- one of only three areas on the west coast designated an Outstanding National Resource Water -- must address the biggest pollutant sources on land. The new Regional Plan is doing that more holistically than ever before by looking at ways to shrink the overall footprint of development in the Basin while at the same time recognizing that private property owners have a crucial role to play in reducing the fine sediment coming from their properties.

Under this plan, we will continue pushing water clarity and environmental quality at Lake Tahoe in the right direction. A key focus of the plan is to help create more walkable, bikeable and attractive town centers to reduce vehicle emissions. Policies also address algae growth and water quality along the lake's shoreline, called the nearshore.

The new plan is neither a development nor a growth plan. Some have gotten used to the idea that the only way to ramp up environmental protection is to create new regulations clamp down on visitors, and reduce access to all activity in Tahoe. Lake Tahoe remains one of the most heavily regulated areas in the nation, and TRPA's high standards for all projects, regional caps on building and growth, prohibitions on land subdivisions and requirements to preserve open space are all staying in place. Some rules, like dust control at construction sites, requirements for complete streets and rules on fertilizer use are getting stronger. But a handful of TRPA's rules have locked bad development in place and created barriers to simple home improvements or environmentally-beneficial redevelopment that are today causing more harm to the Lake's cobalt blue waters.

Keep in mind that before many of TRPA's protections were in place, 75 percent of Lake Tahoe's wetlands and 50 percent of its meadows were acquired as private property and built on. The loss of these natural filters must be addressed, but a reliable source of public funding to 'buy up' some properties from willing sellers or to pay for environmental improvements at the more than 40,000 residences and businesses in the Basin simply cannot form the basis of any realistic restoration plan.

To make meaningful advances in these areas, private property owners need the tools and encouragement to make environmental upgrades and remove existing development from sensitive areas, so the new plan includes incentives that do that. TRPA's targeted enforcement of stormwater infiltration will continue, but the new plan gives small property owners some exemptions for things like garden sheds and new decks when they voluntarily install these measures.

Perhaps the most heartening change to come out of the Regional Plan Update process is that usually polarized groups have come together in support of the plan and there is a spirit of cooperation rising up in Lake Tahoe that will provide more forward momentum to repair the Lake and our small communities. Despite receiving an unprecedented level of support for the new plan from a broad spectrum of people, there will continue to be some misunderstandings about the plan. The new plan is a water quality restoration plan designed for Lake Tahoe's 21st century problems. I encourage you to contact us with questions and to take a closer look for yourself with the fact sheets available at www.trpa.org.

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