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Spanning the Divides of a National Treasure

By Joanne S. Marchetta, Executive Director

More than 40 years ago, two states with very different philosophies forged a visionary compromise in a small but significant corner of their regions. That compromise was a hard-fought battle that formed the unique Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA). Being born of compromise, the TRPA has since spanned the divide between the strongly-held positions of the two states about the Tahoe Basin. That compromise became a bridge between the human and natural environments at the lake and began a constant search for equilibrium between orderly growth and environmental protection.

This bi-state partnership has come into question by some Nevada lawmakers. A bill has been introduced in the Nevada Senate that would remove Nevada from the bi-state Tahoe Regional Planning Compact. Called Senate Bill (SB) 271, the bill is the result of strained relations and a breakdown in diplomacy between the two states as well as frustration with the TRPA as an organization. The question before these lawmakers is whether or not the compromise embodied in TRPA's mission will stand strong. In total, this is the seventh time such a bill has come before the Nevada legislature and although none have reached fruition, the frustrations and criticisms are coming to a new pitch. While it is not for me to answer the question, I can tell you that I share the frustration expressed by those who support the Nevada bill.

TRPA's balancing act has at times produced complicated regulations and stalemates over good projects. The emphasis of the first Regional Plan was on controlling residential development, and we did so with strong regulations. But the reality of today is quite different. No longer is the debate over growth, but over how to make what was built decades ago, before TRPA or its strong rules were in place, more environmentally and economically viable.

I believe TRPA needs to change with the times to continue being relevant to Lake Tahoe's environmental and economic realities. We learned in the mid 1990s that regulations alone

imagine. plan. achieve.

would not reach environmental goals, and that a partnership model of ecosystem restoration was needed.

This shift has been slowly taking hold. When I assumed leadership of TRPA two years ago, I set us on a new strategic path. We understand that improving business operations and honing our actions will enable the agency to return to the role of innovative, regional planner and partnership builder that was originally intended for us. Our management problems are fixable and TRPA is doing much better, but when the definition of better varies philosophically and sometimes drastically between the two states, problems will persist.

Unfortunately, these state-to-state issues are in increasing conflict at a time when we have the most clear cut understanding of necessary solutions to stop the decline in lake clarity and revitalize our struggling communities. Science is telling us we can reclaim the famed clear blue waters of Lake Tahoe not by building, but by rebuilding. In 2008, UC Davis scientists declared that the lake's clarity loss had stabilized and now there is evidence showing that achievement of full restoration of the lake's historic clarity level of 100 feet is possible. We know that focusing on environmental redevelopment and reduced stormwater runoff from our developed areas will gain water quality improvements and help make our communities stronger and safer in the process.

But to do so, we need strong public-private partnerships to bring us into a new era of environmental and economic balance. What we need now is for the legislative and executive branches of California and Nevada to come together again, like the leaders before us, to renew our pledge to move the Tahoe Basin forward. We're hopeful that state legislators and the two new governors will work through philosophical differences and give direction collectively to the TRPA Governing Board.

As long as the compromise exists, and with patience and focus, I can solve management problems within TRPA. But resolving the political polarization requires a revival of the spirit of compromise and care for Lake Tahoe that brought about the first compact. Let's hope our state leaders can transcend political differences and set a standard for collaboration and

partnership that helps us achieve real clarity at Lake Tahoe, both environmentally and economically.

For more information about TRPA's new strategic direction, visit www.trpa.org.

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