

Streamlining Essential to Refocusing TRPA on Regional Issues

By Joanne S. Marchetta, Executive Director

Much is said in commentary about the complicated regulatory environment at Lake Tahoe. For decades, environmental rules here have overlaid the usual building codes for public health and safety. The reason people came together in the 1980s to establish these environmental rules, was to stop harm to Lake Tahoe's sensitive environment. But TRPA and partner agencies discovered in the mid-1990s that regulation alone would not improve Lake Tahoe's environment fully or fast enough. We know now, based on scientific studies, that a regulatory system that results in promoting the status quo where private properties become rundown leads to the continued degradation of the lake and our communities.

We can change this path. TRPA is updating ordinances and permitting processes to help property owners deliver good, environmentally beneficial projects. Since so many properties were built before we had conservation standards in place, there's a great deal of what we call "environmental redevelopment" work to do. And this work can achieve multiple benefits—not just for the environment, but for the economic health and vitality of our local communities.

Last year, TRPA embraced a new strategic plan built on four pillars to achieve our mission. This article is the first in a series describing the four strategic pillars and what they mean for you and the ecosystem in which we are privileged to live. This first part speaks to the importance of streamlining the Tahoe Basin's regulatory processes, which have come to be known as a problem rather than the solution they need to be.

Forthcoming are articles describing how we propose to

- Achieve accelerated environmental gain on the ground
- Improve the Agency's operational efficiency
- Engage the community and advance excellent customer service.

What we are doing to simplify our regulations is especially pertinent because of the bill recently introduced in the Nevada Legislature to withdraw Nevada from the Bi-State Tahoe Compact. According to senators sponsoring the bill, its impetus lies in the intrinsic differences and strained relationships between the states of California and Nevada. However, there is also an understandable amount of frustration and criticism directed at the complexity of the Basin's rules and processes to get a permit, allowing property owners to change the status quo. The introduction of this bill has provided an important opportunity for me to help educate legislators and members of the public on the dramatic shift TRPA has made recently to improve our performance in this area. I have also had the opportunity to outline the many external challenges that exist to the improvements TRPA is trying to make.

With our overarching mission to improve the lake's water quality, the top priority for TRPA's streamlining effort is to reformat and simplify the TRPA Code of Ordinances in a way that is illustrative and narrative so that any property owner or local building inspector can understand what's called for and easily put it to use. A team of staff and consultants have already started this important work and so far, just through reorganization and consolidating redundancy, have found a way to reduce the weight of the document by more than a pound.

Converting all paper records to a more accessible electronic form is another streamlining directive on which we're making progress. Having more records available online will help streamline real estate transactions and basic information searches. When a property owner wants to know how much land coverage is available or other practical information to plan a project, it should be easily accessible from a computer anywhere. These measures will be supported by bringing permit applications online to tie into the revised code of ordinances making all agency processes more transparent, accessible and understandable to the people who need to use them.

But perhaps a more fundamental shift, and one that will take greater resolve and support from partner agencies and conservation groups alike, is the effort to delegate more categories of residential and commercial permitting to your local building departments and to ultimately move TRPA back into the role of innovative, regional planner that was originally envisioned. TRPA needs to focus on partnerships, area-wide solutions, and

multi-jurisdiction coordination to deliver quantum leaps in needed environmental improvement. Permits for a project in your back yard can be consolidated with permits from your local building department to simplify your experience. This ultimate streamlining move will not be easy. Where TRPA has already built strong partnerships with local governments to offer permit services on our behalf, we need to go further so that TRPA can focus on areas where science tells us much greater environmental gains are possible over the next several decades. Shifting our emphasis to regional environmental goals and leaving residential projects to local governments will achieve far greater benefit for the Lake's environment than the cumbersome way we do our business today.

Change comes hard at Lake Tahoe and we'll need community support to work through the opposition that may come from special interests. But TRPA can become the regional planning agency we once were. We can once again live up to our reputation on the world stage as a cutting-edge environmental leader. By becoming the very best at building region-wide partnerships to deliver environmental gain, we can help local communities build their own sustainable futures around a healthy, world-famous environment. TRPA is taking a hard look at itself and has found that our problems are fixable, and I have set TRPA on a course to do just that. Take a closer look at our strategic plan at www.trpa.org. Until next time, thank you.

###