

TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY

128 Market Street
Stateline, Nevada
www.trpa.org

P.O.Box 5310
Stateline, NV 89449-5310

(775) 588-4547
Fax (775) 588-4527
Email: trpa@trpa.org

What is “Good Enough” for Lake Tahoe?

By John Singlaub, Executive Director

There is no question that Lake Tahoe is a scenic wonder. The natural forces that formed this Basin’s forested peaks and deep cobalt blue waters produced handiwork beyond what even the most genius architect or artist could have achieved. What the Washoe found when they arrived here was the perfect vision of a sub-alpine lake – one that needed no improvement. Of course, human nature being what it is, we tried to improve upon it anyway. The Comstock era and most recently the building craze of the 1950s and 1960s brought changes to Lake Tahoe which lacked vision and foresight. The result has been declining lake clarity, unattractive buildings erected among a backdrop of stunning natural features, and parking lots built atop marshes and meadows.

For the past four decades, we have been working to right the mistakes of the past by protecting scenic resources at Lake Tahoe, working to improve the health of our forests, restoring our marshes and stream zones – and by trying to make certain new development is more environmentally benign than what we have seen before. Among the tools we have available for restoring lake clarity and making certain Basin communities evolve the way they ought to is redevelopment of areas with the most potential both in community character and environmental net gains.

That is why TRPA launched its Community Enhancement Program last summer. We invited developers, property owners and members of the public to meet a challenge: to bring forward extraordinary redevelopment projects exhibiting the kind of vision and promise that the Lake Tahoe of the future demands and deserves. To be considered for the program, these projects are to provide important environmental benefits while at the same time reflecting the character and values of the communities where they would be built. Over the past several weeks, nine project pre-applicants who submitted concept designs have participated in workshops where they have received feedback from the public. The choice of options is exciting, there is no doubt. We have a real opportunity to finally redevelop the “Y” in South Lake Tahoe, one of our main gateways. An innovative program to help meet affordable housing needs in Kings Beach is on the table, as are proposals that would alter the built environment of the Kings Beach, Homewood and Crystal Bay areas.

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It is important to note that these projects are nowhere close to final proposals and are merely competing for the chance to move forward at this point. With commercial floor area, multi-residential and tourist accommodation bonus units and possible flexibility on height restrictions, density standards and parking requirements as incentives under the CEP, participants were willing to spend time, effort and money on elaborate project design work with no guarantee that they will be invited to submit an application or begin the formal public review and approval process. Those applicants chosen to move forward will begin the permit process having already received an enormous amount of public input. The CEP project criteria arose from extensive community collaboration as part of the Pathway place-based planning process in which more than 1,800 members of the public participated. To date, an estimated 300 members of the public have participated in CEP community meetings on the conceptual designs. An update on the program is scheduled for the November 28th TRPA Governing Board meeting at the North Tahoe Conference Center in Kings Beach. These projects were conceptualized according to the wishes of community members around the lake. The CEP will ultimately inform Tahoe's new Regional Plan, scheduled for adoption next October, on smart growth principles that promise to guide the look and feel of the Lake Tahoe of the future.

Granted, the whole idea of developing compact, walkable town centers with community gathering places and easy access to public transportation originated in more densely populated urban areas. These concepts can be put to work, however, in a mountain setting such as Lake Tahoe if designed well and tailored to the unique Tahoe environment. That is what we are testing and what we hope to accomplish both with the CEP and the new Regional Plan.

Which brings us to the overriding question in all of this: What is "good enough" for Lake Tahoe? We know what isn't good enough. Box-shaped buildings with expansive parking lots and no best management practices, stagnant communities, traffic congestion and unhealthy forests. To visualize what is good enough for Lake Tahoe, just take a look around at the snow-capped peaks in the winter, the sunlight filtered through the trees, the moonlight shimmering on the lake's surface, the legendary clear blue that has entranced so many to stay here. Truly extraordinary; which is why "extraordinary" is what we have asked for with the Community Enhancement Program and what the community deserves and should demand. For more information about the TRPA, the Community Enhancement Program, or Pathway visit www.trpa.org or www.pathway2007.org.

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