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Protecting Lake Tahoe Takes Time And Requires Partnerships

**By John Singlaub
TRPA Executive Director**

Next year will mark 40 years that the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency has been at the helm of the effort to restore and preserve Lake Tahoe. In that time, we have learned and accomplished quite a bit. We prevented a city the size of San Francisco from being constructed at the Lake. The bridge across Emerald Bay never materialized. That level of development would not have been good for our fragile environment. As new science has emerged, we have implemented programs and land use policies that have helped slow the Lake's long-term clarity loss and given us healthier forests. This progress resulted from the Environmental Improvement Program's restoration and public works projects, many of them examples of the public and private sectors partnering for the benefit of Lake Tahoe. Our best accomplishments have been those resulting from collaboration, cooperation, and informed decision making among all who share a stake in this spectacular place.

During our first generation, we've also learned a few hard lessons. We learned that the Lake is more important than political disagreements between California and Nevada. We learned that we can make smarter decisions when policy direction is based on sound science. And during the 1980s we learned that lawsuits mostly benefit lawyers – and most certainly not Lake Tahoe.

This is why legal action brought by the League to Save Lake Tahoe and the Sierra Club last month (November 2008) to prevent us from better managing shoreline development and boating activities at the Lake is both unfortunate and perplexing. The suit could not only delay implementation of a much-needed Blue Boating and buoy enforcement program at the Lake, but also could ultimately force us to allow more pier construction than TRPA or the political leaders of both states believe is appropriate.

History has shown us that partnerships and careful planning are the best recipes for protecting the Lake. We learned in the 1980s that turning attention and resources toward litigation instead of environmental protection is the wrong approach. That started to change in 1997 when President Bill Clinton helped shepherd a new era of cooperation with the Environmental Improvement Program (EIP). The TRPA, partner agencies and the private sector have worked cooperatively since then – restoring wetlands, installing water treatment measures, removing land coverage, and allowing redevelopment that is environmentally compatible. Thanks to updated science, we know more than ever what it will take to restore Lake clarity and meet all of our comprehensive environmental goals.

For example, because of improved scientific data, we better understand the sources of pollution that have caused Lake Tahoe's clarity loss. The updated Lake Tahoe Regional Plan and EIP will include informed implementation strategies designed to put our knowledge to practice. We also understand more than before how to manage our forest ecosystem and protect the Lake and our communities from catastrophic wildfire. Part of the solutions here will be to install advanced water treatment facilities in areas ripe for redevelopment, a primary source of the fine sediment runoff we must reduce. Additionally, forest fuels must be properly managed and that will mean cutting down trees for the sake of fire safety and ecological health. In the Lake's shorezone area, new science also tells us that we can no longer justify a development ban on piers and buoys in fish habitat. Here, we have a choice between perpetuating a more than 20-year stalemate on this topic, or allowing limited, staged development that leverages environmental improvements, enhances public access where appropriate, and keeps Lake Tahoe blue. Failing to move forward with new shorezone rules puts Lake Tahoe at greater risk by delaying implementation of the new Blue Boating Program, this at a time of increasing concern over the threat that aquatic invaders such as the quagga mussel will reach the lake. More boats will find their way to Tahoe in the future with or without TRPA's shorezone program so the question becomes why wouldn't we want protections in place to combat these impacts?

Our partners in protecting the Lake must be all who have a stake in its future: residents, visitors, property owners, the business community – and, yes – the environmental community. We need partners who do more than oppose and fight us. We need partners who are able to set aside the outdated paradigm of just saying no to everything and focus on what is good for Lake Tahoe. If we fight instead, the Lake will suffer.

- John Singlaub is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. For more information, visit www.trpa.org.

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