

Cost of Doing Nothing Too High for Tahoe

By Joanne Marchetta, TRPA Executive Director

As part of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's 40th anniversary programs, we have recently sorted through decades-old archives to reacquaint ourselves with TRPA's history – and the history of the Lake Tahoe Basin. What we discovered has much to teach. Among the artifacts:

- A photograph of a huge pile of fill from the early 1960s that developers planned to use to construct a 500-foot peninsula in the Lake at the site of the historic Tahoe Tavern.
- Engineering and feasibility studies for a dual-purpose traffic and effluent outflow tunnel through Kingsbury grade connecting Stateline to the Carson Valley.
- A 50-year-old development plan for the entire Tahoe Region, complete with maps and charts, envisioning a metropolis the size of San Francisco at the Lake by 1980.
- Visual renderings produced by the State of California of a bridge spanning the mouth of Emerald Bay, the marquee feature of a planned four-lane, high-speed highway system around the Lake designed to make automobile travel more convenient for tourists and residents.

Opposition to these ideas and others like them gave rise to the conservation movement at Lake Tahoe and ultimately provided the political impetus for creation of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency in 1969. On the heels of the 1960 Winter Olympics at Squaw and with examples all around of environmentally incompatible development, classic battle lines were drawn at that time that still define public policy debates today. To prevent irreparable damage at the Lake back then, we indeed had to put the brakes on runaway growth before exploring ways to balance economic, environmental and social concerns for the long term.

In the 40 years since, the kind of growth at Lake Tahoe that gave us high-rise casinos, an airport on the floodway of the Lake's largest tributary, luxury homes on the Upper Truckee River marsh, and strip malls and motels on stream zones and meadows came to an end. The last 15 of those 40 years has started to shift toward a great deal of restoration and environmental redevelopment work under the Environmental Improvement Program (EIP).

But we're still working on the more complicated question of how to balance the economy, the environment and our communities and until we find that right balance our efforts on behalf of the Lake may be for naught.

Paradigm Shift

Getting there will require a paradigm shift at Lake Tahoe. First, we must accept that the days are over when environmental protection meant simply saying "no" to all development. The Basin is near build-out, meaning the "threat" no longer exists in the same way it did in the late 1980s when there were more than 15,000 vacant parcels facing imminent development. Unfettered growth is no longer a viable option, and so that is not the question.

Today, the question is how to continue realizing environmental gain. We must move forward with restoration work while at the same time replacing the poorly conceived development of the past with a kind of redevelopment that leverages environmental benefits.

As we've seen in recent months, buying into this won't be easy. There are those who still believe that the solution of 30 years ago – “just say no” – must be the solution for today. For some, the fear or unwillingness to allow for responsible change is an obstacle to accepting new information objectively. Today, the environment and communities of Tahoe will not improve or thrive without change.

Last month, members of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board and the public heard an educational briefing entitled “State of the Basin: A Snapshot of the Environment, Economy, and Community.” A history presentation, along with testimony from both academia and the private sector brought out in stark relief the effect of what is now understood as the permanent decline of gaming as the economic driver in the Basin. A status report on community and economic indicators painted a bleak prospect for Tahoe's people and environment unless we allow responsible change: Sale tax revenue and tourist occupancy tax revenue are in decline, as are year-round population, school enrollment, and available jobs. Commercial vacancies are on the rise and businesses and services are disappearing. Our communities are hurting.

Environmental Gains Can Result From Redevelopment

Coupled with the “State of the Basin” were the findings of the Regional Plan Initiative, a joint effort by the North Lake Tahoe and South Shore chambers of commerce and other stakeholders. The initiative had analyzed obstacles and opportunities currently in place for those willing to reinvest in environmental redevelopment projects for Tahoe. This comprehensive study and analysis lays out in black and white critical findings. First, case studies prepared by the US Army Corps of Engineers documented the environmental benefits that resulted from recent years' redevelopment projects at Lake Tahoe. A planning tool now exists as a result of this research that can calculate the environmental benefit that might result from future projects. Other important findings pinpointed changes in current regulations and codes that may be necessary to make future environmental improvements at the Lake possible. The take-home message is that the Lake Tahoe community must transform the aging built environment with more sustainable redevelopment if we are ever to achieve our water quality goals, much less the economic and social revival of Tahoe.

We are working with our partners in the community to see that the Regional Plan Update currently under way at Tahoe includes the kind of changes that will make participating in the ongoing restoration of Lake Tahoe possible. We expect a robust public discussion to continue on this subject in the coming months as the regional plan update progresses. Further, we at the TRPA are appreciative of the fact that Tahoe must reinvent itself as a destination, not only for the sake of the environment, but for the people who want to live and work here. Tourism will drive Tahoe in the future, but not gaming. What will Tahoe's future foundation be? Will we do nothing and have as our legacy Tahoe's continuing, inexorable decline? The economy, the environment and our communities are inextricably linked. For the Lake to thrive, so must the other two.

I encourage all who are interested and concerned about the future of Lake Tahoe to become familiar with the Regional Plan Initiative report and related documents. The package of information can be found on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency web site at www.trpa.org.

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

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