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Let's Settle the Shorezone Debate and Move Ahead

By John Singlaub, Executive Director

While people have very different opinions on the ongoing shorezone debate in terms of what, if any, level of development they think should be allowed on and adjacent to Lake Tahoe's shore, there is one point no one can deny: 20 years of talking it over is enough. Indeed, it's time to move forward with a shorezone program that protects the Lake, respects property rights, and compels people who disagree to meet in the middle. We are hopeful this will happen as soon as this summer. If it does, this will mean more than the end of an era – it will mean the end of unprecedented gridlock that has for too long prevented us from moving forward with a plan that will allow us to keep enjoying Lake Tahoe without degrading it.

There are certainly those who don't believe the shorezone ordinances will ever be approved. And they have good reason to feel that way. Delayed since 1987 while TRPA and partner agencies studied potential impacts of shore area development on fish habitat, the proposal moved close to a Governing Board vote in 2007 only to become entangled in a disagreement between representatives of California and Nevada. Thanks to everyone's best efforts to find middle ground, this February, the two sides agreed on revisions to the basic framework that would allow a shorezone proposal to move forward. Since then, we have been working hard to make sure we have a plan drafted that will satisfy competing concerns while respecting the agreement reached between the two states.

During that time, property owners, environmentalists, recreationists, land managers, project consultants and the public at large have worked with us to make certain the shorezone implementing code is crafted to such a degree that it carries out our intent to allow a scientifically justifiable level of shorezone development that leverages improved fish habitat, enhanced public access and recreation, cleaner boating, and a healthier Lake Tahoe. We have done this work in public and with extensive input from hundreds of interested parties, both from inside and outside of the Basin.

Crafting this proposal is a delicate balancing act, and the ultimate decision sits with the TRPA Governing Board. Here are some key measures of this shorezone proposal that reflect the necessary balance of interests:

- New private pier construction on the Lake would be limited and phased under the current proposal. Today, there are 768 piers along the Lake's 72 miles of shoreline. Only five new private piers each year would be allowed under the current proposal, which also seeks to minimize scenic impacts by incentivizing private property owners to share with their neighbors and requiring piers to be a minimum distance apart. Once 128 new private piers are permitted, no more would be allowed.
- Before additional buoys are allowed on the Lake, a "Blue Boating" program would be developed requiring that motorboats on the Lake be certified clean and kept that way. Requirements could include a decibel noise limit, tuning for high altitude, contained septic systems, cleaned bilge and additional protections from invasive species such as quagga mussels. Ultimately, unauthorized buoys will be required to have a valid permit or be removed and buoy fees would produce funding for programs to help the Lake. Allowing additional buoys would take trucks and boat trailers off the road, contributing to air quality improvements and reduced vehicle trips.
- Fish habitat and public access to the lake shore would be enhanced under the current proposal, as a spawning habitat restoration program and public access projects would be funded by mitigation fees and implemented through public/private partnerships.
- Emerald Bay would become more tranquil and enjoyable, as the boating speed limit would be reduced from the current 15 mph to 7 mph.

As public servants, we at TRPA cannot allow the 20-year shorezone debate to become a 30-year – or never-ending – shorezone debate. While there are strong feelings on both sides and profoundly polarized arguments surrounding this issue, we believe it is our duty to come up with the best set of ordinances we can draft, try to get them approved and then see once and for all if they work. Once we have an improved shorezone program in place, we will be able to evaluate how well it works in practice and work with the TRPA board to make periodic revisions and corrections as needed. The alternative is gridlock that will continue to serve no one, least of all Lake Tahoe.

- *John Singlaub is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. For a complete fact sheet on the shorezone proposal, go to www.trpa.org.*