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Lake Tahoe Ready for Positive Progress

By Joanne S. Marchetta

The terrific start to Lake Tahoe's winter season is a fitting introduction to a year of positive progress for the Lake and the communities that surround it. By the time spring breathes renewed life into Lake Tahoe's ecosystem, many property owners around the Basin will be aiming to start some renewal of their own with new rules adopted by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board at the end of 2012.

Approval of the updated Lake Tahoe Regional Plan was a turning point of its own, coming on a wave of unprecedented cooperation and near-unanimous agreement that we must move this Basin forward. I want to explain what happens next and settle some misconceptions about what the TRPA Board approved in December.

First, adopted changes fall into two categories—those that take effect this winter and those that are only effective once area plans from local governments are in place. Area plans are the next generation community plans and they will be reviewed by the Governing Board in a public process. I also want to emphasize that no development projects were approved by the Board in December and that regional growth caps for the Tahoe Basin remain firmly in place.

While we hope the updated plan helps many lake-saving projects go from the drawing board to a public forum, environmental redevelopment projects in Lake Tahoe's town centers will take careful consideration by the community, local governments, land managers, and others. To facilitate more ecosystem restoration on private properties, these projects must use transferred development rights from sensitive stream zones or outlying areas in order to access new height and density incentives in existing town centers. Such projects can be proposed only after the adoption of area plans. There are a limited number of areas, about 10 commercial centers around the lake, where these types of projects would be concentrated in order to foster walkable, bikeable communities.

For residential properties, important improvements are being brought online that are planned to be in effect this summer for properties that have already completed their Best Management Practices for stormwater and erosion control (BMPs). These amendments allow modest home improvements for some residential properties that were previously impossible. Within certain site constraints, property owners that have a BMP completion certificate can make modest enhancements without exceeding their property's land coverage, which is the limiting factor for the total square footage of

development allowed on each parcel in the Tahoe Basin. With a BMP certificate, disabled access ramps, temporary backyard sheds, and up to 500 square feet of new decking will not count toward a home's coverage limit. More information on these incentives will be featured in workshops this spring.

For properties that don't have a BMP completion certificate, you can get started this spring installing simple measures that infiltrate stormwater and help reduce the fine sediment entering Lake Tahoe by contacting your local conservation district or visiting www.tahoebmp.org.

Changes that only come into effect with an area plan may not be too far away in some locations and a few local governments are expecting to bring their plans to TRPA for review this year. For an area plan to be adopted, it must meet environmental standards and be consistent with the Regional Plan. However, area plans can also propose more innovative ways to regulate land coverage, provide further direction on local community character, and can streamline project permitting to a one-step process—all the more reason for you to contact your city or county planning department and get involved in bringing an environmental plan for your community forward.

I want to be sure the community understands that the purpose of TRPA's updated plan is to increase environmental restoration and the well-being of Lake Tahoe's communities. As the Tahoe Basin comes together to move out of the negative spiral of decline, TRPA is working to implement land use policies that connect more people to recreation with less reliance on the private automobile. New zoning changes at Heavenly and Edgewood on the South Shore, for example, are intended to do just that, and any projects proposed there in the future will undergo significant environmental review and public input to assure these outcomes.

Lake Tahoe is now poised for the next round of environmental gains as our communities play a greater role in the important work to protect and restore this world-famous region.

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

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