

## **“FIRESIDE CHAT”**

**DELIVERED BY TRPA EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, JOANNE S. MARCHETTA**

### ***21<sup>st</sup> CENTURY ENVIRONMENTALISM AND THE REGIONAL PLAN UPDATE***

**FEBRUARY & MARCH 2012**

**Good evening** everyone. **Thank you** for coming out tonight. I am Joanne Marchetta, Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. It's a pleasure to be here at Lake Tahoe Community College to **speak with you about environmentalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century** and TRPA's Regional Plan Update. While I'm not exactly fireside, I'm hoping we can still chat informally together about Lake Tahoe and our collective future as a community.

**What does it mean to be an environmentalist?** Fair to say it probably means many different things to many different people. When I was growing up it was the Age of Aquarius and environmentalism was a young and new political movement symbolized by “Earth Day 1970” – I was young then too and I wanted to **protect the natural environment from the harms of human activity**. In my youth, my view was that people in the landscape were bad because they do damage, so my goal then was to keep people out. (Never mind that I was part of those “people;” I hadn't yet harmonized my views.) The environment was best when it was exclusive of people. My view was uni-dimensional and focused only on the natural environment – only the natural environment was “good” and needed to be saved and the human environment was “bad” and what needed to be prevented.

Today, I've worked on environmental issues with a passion for 30 years. As happens, if you work at it, I've grown some, I have lots of work and life experience, and as a result my definition of and approach to environmentalism has been changed by perspective and experience.

**Environmentalism cannot be defined outside of a context.** What works in one context may not work in another. There is absolutely no doubt that Tahoe is a spectacular natural environment and it needs to be cared for and protected responsibly. But **Tahoe is NOT a National Park**

**where people can't live.** That decision was made a C ago and rejected even then. Why? Because Tahoe did not meet the test – Tahoe's environment already included people and people's activities. The lands of Tahoe were already a mix of private property, used for timber, mining, grazing, recreation, and other human interests.

**Environmentalism for Tahoe in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century** can no longer be a uni-dimensional movement to save the natural landscape at the expense of the people, or to play only to the money without regard to the environment. Environmentalism looks at the whole system, and does not exclude any of the fundamental legs of the system. That ecosystem is not just the natural environment, it also must integrate humans into the system and it must all work economically.

**So the challenge of Tahoe is much more complex than just protecting a natural landscape.**

The challenge here is how to integrate the natural with human and economic considerations.

**Today's environmentalists call it "Sustainability."** .... I call it sustainability.... Now this term has been discussed for a long time, but too often it is just that – talk. You want to know the real challenge? You want to know why I get up every day and continue to do this (very hard) job? Because we **can't just talk sustainability, we must put sustainability into practice.**

**So, how do we make Tahoe sustainable?** I invite you tonight on a journey to give the words environmentalism and sustainability real meaning. It's easy to talk up a good idea – but can you actually take it, put it into practice, and make it work on the ground -- so that the whole system, all its parts, actually work together. Do we know how to actually deliver a sustainable system?

That's what I want to talk about with you tonight. **Our role at TRPA is to responsibly manage the system that is Tahoe for sustainability.** And to give you an idea of the scope: Tahoe is a massive environmental restoration program, on the scale of the other great water bodies of the nation – the Chesapeake, the Everglades, the Great Lakes. And TRPA is managing that massive restoration of the resources of this spectacular Region. But again it's a system and so our charge is not just to RESTORE the environment, but to do so in a way that also RESTORES the

economy, and RESTORES the communities in which we live, work, and play. This is what I mean by sustainability and environmentalism – at least in Tahoe – for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, because the environment, the economy, and the community are connected.

**Here’s the good news. Right now, TRPA is pursuing that goal through – sounds boring – an update of the Tahoe Regional Plan.** Here’s what the Compact says: “Maintenance of social and economic health means maintaining scenic, recreation, education, science, nature, and health values of the Region; we need to protect and enhance these values for residents AND visitors; to insure an equilibrium between the natural endowment and manmade environment; to accomplish establish Environmental Threshold Carrying Capacity (“Thresholds”), Regional Plan and Code to “achieve and maintain Thresholds while providing opportunities for orderly growth and development...”. In 21<sup>st</sup> Century terms that says, make Tahoe sustainable.

Tonight I’m going to tell you what it meant to make Tahoe sustainable 40 years ago, but the actions that worked then will not work now, because the problems of today are different and we’ve already solved many of the problems of the past. Now we need to look forward and act on that basis. So, once you understand the past, then I can offer you a vision of the actions needed today to help Tahoe.

**What did environmentalism mean in Tahoe 40 years ago? It meant stopping things.** When TRPA adopted a Regional Plan in the late 1980s, there was a legitimate concern that Lake Tahoe could be over-developed. It was our role to put the brakes on rampant growth that prevailed in the 50s, 60s, and 70s, and we succeeded. In the 1980s, we established **growth controls**, put caps on all types of development, and drew an urban boundary line to contain development. We adopted environmentally protective rules and regulations and developed an international reputation for innovation in harmonizing the natural environment with a local economy.

The focus in the 1980s was on controlling new development, and particularly controlling residential growth. We prohibited new lot and block subdivisions of land to manage the number of residents in the Basin. It’s no wonder that problems with deck permits became the poster child for this definition of environmentalism. The rules were oriented heavily toward

residential growth control. **Now, 25 years later – we find ourselves near build-out** in the Tahoe Basin. 85% of the land area in Tahoe is publicly owned and will not be developed. Less than 15 percent of the land area is in private ownership and only about 1 percent is in existing town or community center areas. There are very few vacant parcels that are buildable, and most of the development you see today in the Basin occurred before we had a regional plan in place with required environmental protections.

**Growth control is firmly rooted in Tahoe’s system and that is not changing under the RPU.** So the focus of this Plan update is not on growth control as it was a quarter century ago – no, all of those foundation provisions of the Plan will stay in place, and the majority of the RP, which has not expired and is still in effect, is not changing.

**The environmental challenges in Tahoe today are different -- not related to residential growth or really about growth at all.** Unemployment. Poverty. Businesses closed. Schools closed. The population of the Tahoe Basin has been shrinking for a decade and the economies and social fabric of our small communities are in crisis. **Today’s challenge is not stopping growth, today’s challenge is SURVIVAL. What’s happened to Tahoe?** We got so good at stopping things – and TRPA is the icon and villain of stopping action – that we have locked in place the status quo of half a century ago. While other communities outside Tahoe improved themselves during the economic exuberance a decade ago, Tahoe stayed static. You might say good – Tahoe shouldn’t change. It should stay as it is just as the 80s definition of environmentalism indicates – that people should be excluded in order to save Tahoe.

**What is the real effect of Tahoe staying static?** Water quality has been consistently declining in Tahoe for 40 years. Scientists studied what’s been happening in the Lake. And here’s what we know now that we didn’t know then. Science now tells us that roadways and the existing outdated built environment – meaning our highways and local streets along with town centers mostly built 40 years ago – is responsible for 72% of the pollution entering Lake Tahoe – fine sediment, but also phosphorus, and nitrogen.

**Doing nothing is NOT an option.** If we don't find a cost feasible way to tackle this 72%, the Lake will decline, the environment will worsen. If we do nothing, we will lose the Lake.

**So, since these pollutants are coming from the existing built environment** -- the **new challenges for Lake Tahoe in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are replacing our aging infrastructure**, and, in an era of declining government budgets – **figuring out how to pay for it.** That's the new challenge – how do we improve or replace what we have and pay for it. And it's a big price tag – hundreds of millions, even possibly another billion dollars.

**These new challenges require a new approach to environmentalism; one that embraces partnerships between agencies and organizations, as well as public/private partnerships** as a way to improve our thresholds by environmentally redeveloping these aging properties in a manner that benefits the environment as well as our communities and economy. The emphasis then in this update, unlike the last Regional Plan, is on fixing the existing built environment we already have – and incentivizing property owners to replace and upgrade facilities to install both state-of-the-art water quality treatments as well as many other forms of up-to-date 21<sup>st</sup> Century conservation measures. These are treatments and measures needed to make progress toward the Compact's mandate to achieve environmental benefits. And this pressing need of our time is a key impetus in one of the proposed implementation strategies in this Regional Plan Update – **environmental redevelopment**.

**What is environmental redevelopment?** Let's talk about what it is and what it is not.

Environmental redevelopment is not about growth. It is about rebuilding our old, environmentally polluting structures with the highest environmental design standards across multiple categories – transportation, energy, architecture, amenities, scenic, water quality, air quality, and land coverage; and in so doing, create the environmental benefits for Lake Tahoe we all desire. How do we do this through the Regional Plan Update?

**So, where the last Regional Plan was mostly about controlling residential growth on vacant land and only a little bit about fixing the existing built environment, this plan update is now predominantly focused on improving regulations that have frozen in place some of the existing development patterns and run-down buildings you see.** So, go back to the sustainability system. It is critical, if we wish to improve the clarity of Lake Tahoe, that we facilitate the environmental redevelopment of these old structures and stormwater runoff treatments on our roadways so that they no longer pollute the Lake.

But, the environment won't improve unless we can get the economics to work, and the economics don't work unless we can deliver the on the ground fixes we need. Our RP makes modest adjustments that make the system work to deliver on the sustainability promise.

**The essence of the plan update can be boiled down to three key enhancements:**

1. Removing the barriers to restoration of the lake's **water quality** – and from that, achieving synergistic environmental gains in other resource areas.
2. Restoring a **truly regional role to TRPA** where we can deliver the greatest environmental gain with increasingly limited dollars and resources, and
3. Improving the Tahoe Basin's **permit review system**.

**First as to restoring the Lake's water quality and making other related environmental gains:**

As you likely know, at Tahoe, we count every square foot of land cover – building footprints, driveways, and other paved areas – and we limit how much impermeable coverage can exist on private property and how much of the property should remain as open space. This **land coverage system has had the unintended consequence of locking grandfathered development as well as land coverage patterns in place** with little change or improvement to many buildings around the lake. The Regional Plan Update is proposing additional incentives to property owners to redevelop older buildings to help restore Lake clarity as well as making other environmental improvements. For example, one proposal in our plan is to create **incentives for property owners to use pervious driveways, decks, and other surfaces that infiltrate runoff** by

offering land coverage credits or exemptions. We should be encouraging the use of innovative products, not letting 1980s rules promote the status quo.

**Here's how all of this fits together ... And, here's what's really cool and novel about it -- we are proposing to do in Tahoe what no one else in the state, indeed no one else in the country is attempting to do:**

- 1 **First, we are not growing the Basin. We will shrink the development footprint** of the Tahoe Basin by moving existing development and development rights from remotely located environmentally sensitive areas that create the greatest need for use of automobiles and their related air and water pollution problems. This will help our stream environment zone or wetlands threshold, currently out of attainment.
- 2 We will shrink the development footprint by moving existing development around. We will **move that development to targeted areas** such as the town centers, that are more compact, have mixed uses, and where people can walk, bike and ride transit as an alternative to using an automobile.
- 3 Why do we care about a compact development pattern? One of the biggest contributors to environmental harm – cars and sprawl. Our Regional Transportation Plan will meet Green House Gas emission reduction targets because of this shrinking of the development footprint and because of the multi-modal transportation strategies being put in place in the target areas: complete streets, public transit, parking management, connectivity to bicycle/pedestrian trails, connectivity to water transit, etc. And do you know what is the biggest environmental benefit engine? Would you believe me if I say it's our transportation system? Yes, transportation system improvements are the next biggest arena for water quality, air quality and other environmental Threshold gains.
- 4 In these target areas the existing development will be upgraded and/or replaced with the highest environmental design standards including: energy, architecture,

amenities, scenic, and state-of-the-art water quality and air quality improvements. By using land coverage policies that concentrate development in town centers we can also create greater open space in our more environmentally sensitive areas.

- 5 By making these changes in the Regional Plan Update we not only improve the environment but will also draw more private investment that will create new employment opportunities for local families. Our tourism industry will be refocused on outdoor recreation-oriented tourism and visitor services, and two additional focus areas for economic development will be pursued: health and wellness, and environmental innovation.

Now why would I say that rebuilding green is what we need to do to Keep Tahoe Blue? Science is what is driving this direction. There are skeptics who say, “It’ll never work.” OK, skepticism, cynicism has become a national past-time and so we have gridlock. But by doing nothing, we now know the science says the Lake will only get worse. So, we are committed to testing the outcome of this approach to ensure we are on the right track. We will be scientifically monitoring implementation of our environmental redevelopment strategy with the intention of altering any areas that are not working as planned. In the scientific world, this is referred to as “adaptive management” which is a systematic process for continually improving policies by learning from your outcomes. In the future, the Regional Plan will be reviewed and updated every four or five years based on the outcome of our monitoring efforts in order to make progress on environmental thresholds. And I want to be clear that limiting the amount of land coverage at Lake Tahoe will continue to be a cornerstone of TRPA’s plan to protect Lake Tahoe’s water quality; it’s just how land coverage policies are implemented that we are proposing to improve.

The Regional Plan Update is actually striving to remake the Tahoe Basin’s development footprint – something extraordinary and unique, as it should be for Tahoe because Tahoe is extraordinary. We are shifting land use patterns, reducing our environmental impacts, and



remaking the built environment in a way that will IMPROVE our environmental thresholds, while at the same time RESTORING and strengthening the economy and communities of the Tahoe Basin. This is cutting edge and promises to put Lake Tahoe back on the environmental innovation map, now and in coming decades.

**Another essential change to the Regional Plan relates to restoring a truly regional role to**

**TRPA:** Over the decades, we may have become too focused on localized and site-specific issues to maintain a truly regional focus on delivery of environmental benefits as intended by the Compact. TRPA's vision is for an improved planning and permitting system where many parcel-by-parcel development decisions transition to local county or city governments in accordance with TRPA approved plans and regulations – a system of so-called CONFORMITY review and approval. If the Board decides to pursue this new conformance review system, we believe it will beneficially refocus TRPA on achieving key regional environmental goals while removing the need in most cases for two layers of often duplicative permit requirements.

Under this new approach, local governments would create localized land use plans that must meet the Compact's environmental standards. In turn, local governments could tailor their plans to their locality and have more autonomy in administering planning and permitting responsibilities to better serve the unique circumstances and desired character of each community. In designing these modifications to Tahoe's planning system, TRPA is looking to already effective regional planning models, like the Truckee Meadows Regional Planning Agency or the California Coastal Commission. Using the best from these tried and true existing models, we believe this transition will allow TRPA to focus its limited resources on achieving regional gains on regional issues like water and air quality, invasive species, and transportation planning. The Governing Board is discussing how this new approach should evolve, including how appeals of local decisions should factor in and what types of projects should be deemed regionally significant so that TRPA would retain first line permitting authority going forward.

**And then there is the third essential adjustment to the Regional Plan – improving the efficiency of the Basin’s permit review system:** We will incentivize these environmental redevelopment upgrades by streamlining the development process, creating more certainty in permit processing, and providing local governments the option to create “one-stop-shops” for permit processing instead of the multiple jurisdiction permits currently required.

**So, where are we today in the process of the Regional Plan Update?** We are less than a year away from completing the Regional Plan Update and I am absolutely committed to meeting the deadlines we’ve established. A 6-member committee of the Governing Board that includes representation from both states and from both statewide and local entities has been reviewing the draft Plan Update line by line and will report out to the Governing Board and Advisory Planning Commission at a joint meeting at the end of March. That report will launch a sixty-day period of public comment on a Draft Plan Update and accompanying Draft Environmental Impact Statement, including workshops and hearings throughout the Basin. I encourage you to participate in this process and let your voices be heard – particularly our young people in the audience. This is your future and you can help shape it.

Over the course of the coming spring and summer, TRPA will work with stakeholders to craft compromises on key issues of disagreement and will bring forward a final Regional Plan in the fall. And as of today, the Governing Board and staff are fully on track and on schedule to take action on the final plan by December 2012.

**Essentially,** the Regional Plan Update contains something for everyone. For the shop owner that needs greater assurance in the permitting process; for the hiker that wants pristine areas to remain protected; for families that want a healthy, productive place to raise their children, and for all who want to see increased efficiencies and effectiveness in the Agency’s operation, updates to the Regional Plan can and will meet a wide range of expectations if we are willing to work together to do so. With open collaboration, active public participation, continuing stakeholder engagement, reasonable compromise, and the support of our many partners in

Lake Tahoe's protection, we can move the Tahoe Basin into the 21<sup>st</sup> century with an updated Regional Plan that achieves these many goals. That's my vision for Tahoe environmentalism in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. I want to reiterate that TRPA welcomes your involvement in this process as we create a sustainable future together.

Thank you for your time and attention. I'd be happy to entertain questions.