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Why Clarity Matters at Lake Tahoe

**By Joanne Marchetta
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Despite the implication of the term, clarity has its nuances. It can mean “the quality of being clearly expressed,” which in itself is critical for those of us in the forefront of the effort to restore and preserve Lake Tahoe. After all, if our intentions are not clearly understood, we have difficulty gaining the support needed for success. Then, there are secondary meanings such as “clearness in what somebody is thinking,” or, “the quality of being clear in sound or image.” Finally, clarity can mean, “having a transparent quality.” A primary meaning of the word “clear” is for something to be “free from anything that darkens or obscures.” All of these definitions and meanings have relevance to Lake Tahoe and its future.

A generation ago, before the development in the 1970s was going unchecked, Lake Tahoe’s water clarity was measured at an average annual depth of about 100 feet. Today, the clarity stands somewhat obscured at approximately 70 feet. Much of the collective effort over several decades at Lake Tahoe has centered around some day restoring the Lake to that 100 foot standard. In the first decade of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program, initiated for Tahoe in the mid 1990s, about \$1.4 billion has been spent on restoration efforts, about half of it on projects designed to improve water quality. Because of that investment, we appear to have turned a corner toward our goal. The rate of Lake clarity decline has flattened. Additionally, most of the indicators we use to gauge the overall environmental health of the Basin are moving in a positive direction. With a more clear scientific understanding today of how to tackle the problem, we are confident that we can and will complete the job.

In July, the TRPA Governing Board endorsed the first comprehensive update to the original EIP. The update spells out about \$2.5 billion in added environmental investment required to continue the commitment over the next decade. Water quality, watersheds and habitat improvements will account for more than half of that continued restoration work. We also are moving forward with an updated Lake Tahoe Regional Plan that will act as a blueprint for achieving environmental standards.

Without a doubt, \$2.5 billion is a lot of money. The states of Nevada and California, the federal government, local jurisdictions and the private sector will be called upon in coming months and years to be financial partners in this effort in much the same way that they stepped up during the first decade of the EIP to invest in environmental projects throughout the Basin. As we move forward, we owe it to all who have a stake in the Lake to clearly articulate why clarity is important, what it will take to get there, and why the investment will be worth it.

Ten years of scientific research now reveals that Lake clarity is a meaningful indicator of how compatibly we are living with the land. Fine sediment and nutrients flowing mostly from already developed sites reach the Lake, reducing water clarity. The losses are tied to our past land use choices. A 50-year-old motel and blacktop parking area built in a stream zone, for example, probably ought never to have been located there. Because of much better scientific information,

we know that now. But many of these structures were built in that very fashion during the Squaw Olympics boom period. We built on 75 percent of marshes and 50 percent of natural meadow areas before TRPA had a regional environmental plan in place. This is one reason why land use in Tahoe is so tightly controlled. There exists a cap on what can be built or added in the Basin, along with incentives to relocate existing development off of sensitive land. Let's be clear: the reason we have policies that incentivize moving structures from old properties to new is for the environmental benefits that are realized when old buildings are removed from land that can be restored to benefit the Lake. The incentive is not as some suggest to foster new and additional development; it is to foster changes to the existing built environment for environmental gain. This is one way we can promote revitalization and restoration through private investment.

By compelling commercial and residential property owners to do erosion control work or "best management practices" (BMPs), we further benefit the Lake. BMPs also account for most of the private investment in Lake clarity needed under the EIP. We should also be clear that neither revitalization nor BMPs alone can be the panacea to achieve our environmental goals. But these measures to be sure are a critical step that each of us can take toward environmental progress.

The newly updated EIP charts a clear course of environmental investment for the Lake Tahoe Basin over the next 10 years. It includes critically important strategies for keeping the Lake clear of aquatic invasive species such as quagga and zebra mussels. The EIP also spells out our plans to step up efforts to reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire by clearing our forests of built up fuel. By realizing both environmental and economic goals, our communities will remain viable enough to meet their part of the commitment to invest in the continued environmental protection of Lake Tahoe.

We must clearly explain now to those who we are asking to re-up (and increase) their financial commitments to the Basin why continued restoration and preservation will be worth it. Would you continue to invest if you held little hope for the vitality of the environment, economy, or social future of Lake Tahoe? The alternative – giving up on clarity after all we have accomplished thus far – is clearly not an option.

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

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