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Dear 2007:
We Learned From You, But We Won't Miss You

By John Singlaub, Executive Director

As Lake Tahoe bids farewell to 2007, we're reviewing what will prove to be an unforgettable year. A nearly snowless season left businesses and the economy in a winter crunch. Then, the Angora Wildfire tragically destroyed 254 homes, disrupting the lives of many and diverting summer tourists who might have helped the economy recover slightly from the aftereffects of a lackluster season. Our friends and neighbors lost a great deal during the fire and we continue to be amazed at the resiliency of our community. With a neighborhood in ashes and businesses in a crunch, 2007 turned out to be a year of hard lessons for all of us who care about Lake Tahoe.

At the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, we had been looking forward to 2007 as a time for us to recognize a decade of progress for our Environmental Improvement Program (EIP). The EIP was set to be the focus of the 10th annual environmental summit at the lake and a return visit by former President Bill Clinton who kicked off the program in 1997. Instead, all was overshadowed during the August summit by talk of the fire and its aftermath, and questions about whether TRPA's erosion control policies had contributed to the fire's spread by discouraging property owners from creating defensible space.

We agree that creating defensible space and applying fuels treatments to the overstocked forests of the Tahoe basin are critical to protect life, property and the environment at large from the effects of catastrophic wildfire. We knew this before the Angora wildfire got our attention. We hope to use this heightened awareness to bring momentum to our fire prevention efforts by working with Tahoe Basin fire professionals. TRPA codes and policies relating to Tahoe's forests and fire safety are under review. Changes to our tree-cutting rules as they apply to defensible space will take effect January 27, and more code changes will increase personnel on the ground certified to conduct defensible space assessments. Before Angora fades from our memories, we must take the opportunity to fix what needs to be fixed to reduce the possibility an even worse fire will occur in the future. With cooperation and collaboration from our agency partners and everybody in Lake Tahoe who has a stake in this, we will be successful.

And while all of this transpires, snow covers window sills, rooftops and peaks around the lake, suggesting the promise of better days ahead. If 2007 was a year of lessons learned, 2008 will be a defining year of important work that will shape the Tahoe Basin well into the future.

A new Regional Plan for the Tahoe Basin will come together next year which will guide development over the next two decades, bringing with it many environmental net gains for the Basin. Concurrently, we will invite the proponents of nine ambitious redevelopment plans around the lake to submit applications and begin the formal public review process under TRPA's Community Enhancement Program. Again, the lake environment will benefit along with our communities. We will develop a new regional transportation plan for the Basin, finalize our

shorezone policies and take part in an inter-agency program for eradicating aquatic invasive species that threaten the ecological balance of the lake.

Finally, the next phase of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program will begin to take shape, one that promises to be full of ambitious and innovative ideas for how we might preserve, restore and improve the overall environmental health of the Basin and, of course, move closer to restoring the lake's legendary clarity to our goal of 100 feet.

All the while, reducing the risk of another catastrophic wildfire in Lake Tahoe remains the agency's number one priority – and we will continue to work with fire professionals and the Bi-State Fire Commission established by the California and Nevada governors to keep the momentum going so that we make more progress in this critical area.

And so, we will not miss you, 2007. But we are cognizant of the lessons you brought. We will enter 2008 focused on future achievements, not anxious to celebrate past accomplishments. As we look forward to a snowy, successful winter, we'll roll up our sleeves for a defining 2008 of hard work. From all of us at TRPA, Happy Holidays!

-- *John Singlaub is Executive Director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.*