

Sustainable food initiatives gaining traction in Tahoe



By Garry Bowen

In the past year, the city of South Lake Tahoe has launched initiatives geared to taking the community in sustainable directions. First, they created a Sustainability Action Plan, followed by the creation of a Sustainability Commission, currently engaged in discussions about SLT's coming-of-age. There are 10 items in the sustainability action plan, and the Commission has deemed four of the 10 as worthy of prioritization as their first focus, and item No. 9 is my subject.

Nationally, September is Organic Harvest Month, which affords a good time to look at No. 9 – Healthy Food Systems, as it can and will positively affect the overall health for most of South Shore's citizenry. Food and sustenance are subjects important to all residents, and anyone else who ventures into town as our guest, as our reputation for hospitality and vitality are at stake, whether dining at home or at one of our many restaurants, either outside or within casinos.

The Organic Trade Association, which introduced and has sponsored Organic Harvest Month since 1992, notes that "organic" stands for a commitment to an agricultural system that strives for a balance with nature, using methods and materials of low impact to the environment. Organic production systems are designed to replenish and maintain soil fertility, eliminate the use of toxic and persistent chemical

pesticides and fertilizers, and build a biologically diverse agriculture. Sounds like the issues we deal with all the time here, under agency domains.

Sustenance and sustainability are intricately tied together, as the current health care quagmire “ now almost 100 years old “ doesn’t make very clear. Lost in the Washington stakes of high financial and political conversation are the simplest family values of taste, nourishment, and health. South Lake Tahoe can now regain what’s lost by contributing to each other in neighborly ways, something which will play an important role as an emerging sustainable community. If we can think of sustenance as an essential building block of living sustainably, then the connection of healthy, fresh food to a vibrant community becomes more and more obvious “ especially here.

Just last week, in a *New York Times* op-ed piece, renowned food writer Michael Pollan (“Omnivore’s Dilemma”; “In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto”) made significant connection between the current health care debate and the need to change our way of feeding ourselves.

In a piece titled “Big Food vs. Big Insurance”, he says “that even the most efficient health care system that the administration could hope to devise would still confront a rising tide of chronic disease linked to diet.” These comments make SLT’s sustainability action plan item No. 9 a potent crystal ball in recognizing that determining a local future needs consideration right now.

“Working toward a vibrant and regional food system that connects fresh, healthy food to residents, grocers, casinos, and restaurants can now realistically be an objective with tangible, long-term benefits, as a sustainable economic development tool to build health and wealth.”

Looking at a couple of other points within No. 9, one of them

says, “Design a permanent year-round public market in the city to serve as a community gathering place”. Others encourage “gardening in good soils, with access to water and sunlight”, “organic food supply”, and “locally-owned and ecologically-sound storage and distribution infrastructure” while yet another calls for “providing assistance connecting food establishments with consumers and producers”. This writer, with the help of some key people in the region, will soon propose a comprehensive idea to cover all of the above points, and do it in a way that will be fun and engaging for the entire South Shore community. For example, the “community gathering place” can and will also foster youth educational programs, so that our youth will be equipped to comprehend our world’s natural offerings “ by engaging our next generations with what a community can actually do for itself.

Why are these directions not only smart, but very important to our community’s fate? As Pollan notes further, we currently spend nationally \$147 billion treating obesity, another \$116 billion to treat diabetes, and several hundred billion more treating cardiovascular disease, all of which are diet-related. Putting it another way, our government is “now putting itself in the uncomfortable position of subsidizing both the costs of treating Type 2 diabetes and the consumption of high-fructose corn syrup”. A system that will clearly be unsustainable for years to come “ reducing the above categories of cost are better done preventively, town-by-town. Add them all up, and they begin to total at least three-quarters of the estimated \$900 billion cost of reform, but without more nourishment. Lowered costs do not necessarily translate into better health, or an engaged community.

The opening statement of Healthy Food Systems states that “climate and elevation make local food production a challenge”, which of course meant that that was the first consideration in taking on the challenge of convening the

right elements (beyond "soil and access to water and sunlight"). We are very fortunate to already have extensive expertise in these areas, including minimal transport issues, and ongoing deposition of both our forest waste and our food wastes into compost amenable to high-elevation growing, in providing copious amounts of our own food.

Although it will take a while to accurately quantify actual benefits, it nevertheless resonates that better nutrition, less transport (or import), better taste and color, and lower overhead will all translate into a community shift of resources that will revive and enhance community spirit in many ways. Many citizens can contribute and participate in ways vital to their own health and well-being, and that of their neighbors, to the betterment of all who want the most livable place.

Finally, to better understand the local issues of either the "locavore" or slow-food movements, it is important to underline the importance of unnecessary transport. It is estimated that, for a number of vegetables and fruits, natural sugars (i.e., the nutritional energy) are reduced every 24 hours by a factor of as much as 50 percent. This is the issue with color, taste and nutrition " we don't always get full value from the money we spend for produce. Or the nutritional value we need to lead healthy, productive lives " this is the promise of Healthy Food Systems that the City has afforded us, which offers the following meaning: "Real community wealth is achieved when people combine energy and effort to manifest a sustainable future" . . . for themselves and others.

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