

Prosperity plan's focus: health care, environment, tourism

By Kathryn Reed

INCLINE VILLAGE –Tourism, health-wellness, and the environment. These three areas are supposed to be the economic saviors of Lake Tahoe.

In a room full of about 70 of Tahoe's movers and shakers on Monday the two-hour talk was all about the Lake Tahoe Basin Prosperity Plan. A bit of irony is the meeting was at the Lone Eagle Grille in Incline. Incline Village is sometimes called Income Village based on the wealth of the homeowners.



John
Breternitz,
Washoe County
commissioner,
opens the
economic forum
on Aug. 16.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who has been instrumental with a handful of others to initiate this plan, promised this isn't just another document to collect dust, but

is one with legs.

But the problems of today are what they were 20 years ago, only exacerbated because of the recession, and the declining relevance of gaming in the basin and throughout Nevada.

This group believes the prosperity plan will change what the Lake Tahoe Basin will look like 20 years from now. If all things go according to this plan, employment won't be in double digits, lake clarity will continue to improve, the area will be transformed into environmental innovation centers, a sports commission will attract major events, medical centers of excellence will sprout, high speed Internet access everywhere will allow for telemedicine and e-commerce.

But much of what is being said is what the people who live "poverty with a view" know – it has always been about the environment. Many in that room are the ones who pooh-poohed that for years. Their personal wallets were thick, or government-agency bank accounts flush with cash. Not so anymore. Poverty with a view is hitting closer to home.

People for years have said Tahoe needs a second economy to sustain itself during the ebbs and flows of tourism. But no one did anything. Look at Boulder, Colo., a mountain town that thrives not on tourism, but biotechnology firms. And, yet, it is an outdoor mecca much like Tahoe.

Tahoe could already have a world-class orthopedic center instead of being in the infancy of creating one. Dr. Richard Steadman left South Tahoe's Barton Memorial Hospital for Vail in 1990 because there he had the support to create what he wanted.

Steadman's website says, "Dr. Steadman has developed numerous techniques for knee surgery and rehabilitation that have been adopted worldwide for the treatment of various knee disorders."

What if those had been created in Tahoe? Would the area be more prosperous? Would people come here for destination health care? That's a goal of this prosperity plan – to have people come here for health care needs. Barton can't survive on the medical needs of locals. When it's a bad ski season or mountain injuries are down, hospital revenues are blood red.

It was repeatedly pointed out at the Aug. 16 meeting that government is not going to be the savior. It will take the private sector to make this plan a reality. But it will also take buy-in from locals – the ones, perhaps, who have not been listened to in the past and have become jaded.

According to the executive summary the plan is, "To rebrand the region as a green, geotourism, health and wellness visitor destination, providing a unique, authentic Lake Tahoe experience including sports, recreation, culinary, historical, art, cultural experiences, environmental education and volunteer opportunities."

As South Tahoe City Councilman Hal Cole put, it seemed like a political shindig more than a nuts and bolts meeting.

When *Lake Tahoe News* asked B Gorman, one of the leaders of the prosperity plan and executive director of the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, if transit would be part of this, she said, "No."

LTN responded that a reliable bus going around the lake would be good for those who need it and those who want it – locals and tourists; in addition to reducing vehicle miles traveled, which is always touted as an environmental benefit.

Lake Tahoe Community College and Sierra Nevada College were touted as places of higher learning that will help foster the goals. But in a climate where education spending is continually being cut, it's hard to know if these institutions or universities in either state could be relied upon as incubators of Tahoe prosperity.

Today, according to stats provided by prosperity officials, Tahoe creates \$4.7 billion in revenues a year. Tourism is the dominant contributor.

Rick Tremblay with the federal Economic Development Administration said for the short-term Tahoe needs to reinvent its tourism model, while for the long-term it needs to “aggressively invest in technology.”

His examples of small towns that have done big things were interesting, but oddly irrelevant to Lake Tahoe. The region doesn't have the land for much of what he talked about. Nor is manufacturing likely to happen based on all the regulations.

During the panel discussion where six people were invited to give input to the plan, Jared Blumenfeld, Region IX administrator for the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, said, “It's not a new idea to be green. You need to get it right and be bold. You need to have goals.”

Goals, if there are any, were not discussed Monday.

Blumenfeld further pointed out, “I think your brand is ahead of where you are.” Meaning, people expect Tahoe to be green and healthy. He said people are disappointed to find out how that really isn't the case, and how dilapidated so much of the infrastructure is. Blumenfeld also pointed out how it's hard to eat healthfully in Tahoe.

John Breternitz, Washoe County commissioner, said questions asked by forum attendees and the answers would be put on the website, but the FAQ page says it's under construction.