

Opinion: Taking Tahoe, TRPA in new direction

By Joanne Marchetta

We are in the midst of extraordinary times here at Lake Tahoe and I believe the basin is at a crossroads. We can either move toward a sustainable, prosperous future for our treasured environment and communities, or we can cling to old paradigms and continue the sliding decline.

As TRPA's executive director, I'd like to share my thoughts on some of Lake Tahoe's significant challenges, how we can meet them and how I am transforming the TRPA into a new organization poised to tackle these pressing issues head-on. If I've learned one thing during my tenure at TRPA, it's that strong leadership and even stronger partnerships are the fundamental ingredients to taking Lake Tahoe in a new direction. The playing field here has many opportunities for you to join in and strengthen our partnership to achieve a common purpose.



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Simply put, Tahoe is in decline and in crisis. Our lake is not just an aesthetic and spiritual jewel. The reality is that Lake Tahoe supports nearly a \$5 billion economy for the two states that share its border. That economy is grounded squarely in tourism – and that economy, like others today, is

in relative crisis. Make no mistake, we are in a crisis. This is not crisis borne merely of the national and international banking meltdown, which merely exacerbated Tahoe's problem. Tahoe's crisis is that its historic economic foundation – gaming – is falling out from under us regardless of the larger national and international economic problems.

Living within one of the most spectacular landscapes in the world, it is hard to believe that our economy and communities are in peril. But indeed, they are. When the basinwide unemployment rate hovers between 12 and 17 percent, when schools have closed and we've lost more than 10,000 residents in the basin over a decade, and when a single mother living in Tahoe can't afford to buy Tylenol for her son's fever – our community's foundation is in trouble.

On top of growing economic and social strains, we face the newly-acknowledged environmental threats of invasive species and catastrophic wildfire, and the continuing threat of the adverse effects of stormwater runoff, any or all of which pose lasting impacts to our fragile alpine lake ecosystem, the very ecosystem without which there would be no economic support for Tahoe.

The good news is that Tahoe's problems can be solved, and we have a growing collective vision of actions needed to set the most meaningful solutions in motion. But this is Tahoe. These actions will take every ounce of our collective leadership to push through to decision and TRPA has already set its own course of solutions in motion. We have already committed to being part of the positive momentum that will address our environmental, economic, and communitywide challenges.

There are two parts to this positive course of action. First, the progress TRPA is making toward updating the Regional Plan for the Tahoe Region; and second, a new TRPA Strategic Plan that is remaking the internal workings and culture of TRPA to be part of the needed solution.

Restoring Lake Tahoe

First, guiding the direction and progress of TRPA's Regional Plan Update is our drive to fulfill the original intent of the bi-state Compact that was created 40 years ago to protect this spectacular environment. The Compact remains the agency's touchstone, but what we do today must be done with a different eye than what we did in the past because we know more now.

Three decades ago, there was a legitimate concern that Lake Tahoe could be over-developed. It was our role to put the brakes on rampant growth, and we succeeded. We saved Lake Tahoe from turning into a city the size of San Francisco, as some had envisioned. We adopted environmentally protective rules and regulations and developed an international reputation for innovation in harmonizing the natural environment with human-made development to support strong local economies.

Today we find ourselves nearly at build-out in the Tahoe basin. But let's put the term "build-out" in perspective. Most environmental harm today is still coming from development put on the ground before TRPA had standards in place. The vast majority of continuing harm to the lake is due to already existing but dated, aging, deteriorating facilities built 30, 40, and 50 years ago including the roadway system. Recent science is showing that if we are ever to meet our lake clarity goals, we need to attack urban stormwater runoff problems – to eliminate fine sediment flowing into the lake by at least 32 percent over the next 20 years. The data indicate this runoff is coming from already developed areas, including our town centers. With this scientific information, we know how to get the greatest environmental bang for the buck – by replacing and upgrading already existing facilities that were put in place long ago.

The synergy is evident. By remaking our existing Tahoe town centers to achieve key environmental goals, there is the

concurrent opportunity to also bring back or strengthen Tahoe's economy by bringing it up to date to meet today's tourism needs and demand.

Even if we are near Tahoe's full development potential, our buildings and infrastructure on the ground today no longer support today's economy much less the environment. Today we are well below the population, traffic flows, and visitorship that we experienced in the early 1990s. So, although we say we are near build-out, are we where we need to be to support either the environment or the economy? We have had only a handful of major projects – all redevelopment projects to replace dated facilities – during the last 10 years basinwide.

In fact, Tahoe missed the robust economic remake and update that many communities took advantage of during the 15 years of irrational exuberance before the national financial meltdown. What happened here in Tahoe during that period was that we eeked out projects over long delays and burdensome process obstacles, and the delay exacerbated our slip into economic decline. Our built environment is an anachronism and no longer serves the current predominant tourist demand for services, activities, or amenities.

Another important point about build-out is that the largest part of the lake's environmental problem exists on a small percentage of the land area. Again, we know where the bulk of the environmental problem originates – already developed areas and roadways. Did you know that less than 15 percent of the land in the basin is in private ownership? And did you know that the majority of the pollutant load that causes declines in lake water quality is coming from an even smaller percentage of our developed areas and town centers?

We must allow the built environment of Tahoe to change so that we can incorporate state-of-the-art environmental improvements on the ground at the same time as we remake the economy. And since we know from the recent water quality science that we

have to actually reduce the sediment flowing into Lake Tahoe, it means we have to facilitate change on the ground.

To tie these points about build-out together – environmental redevelopment may be part of the solution. What we're proposing as part of our Regional Plan update is to fix through replacement – not growth – the existing built environment that is causing the greatest environmental harm to the lake.

But we all know change comes hard at Lake Tahoe and some would have you believe that TRPA is promoting growth or increased urbanization of the Tahoe basin. I can't disagree with this characterization strongly enough. What we're doing is exactly what the science tells us needs to be done – fixing the existing built environment that is causing harm to the lake, not promoting growth, not building sky scrapers, and not pushing development for the sake of development only. That would be a step backward. We are saying environmental redevelopment is a necessary environmental tool among others. We absolutely believe Lake Tahoe's pristine environment can be protected while at the same time improving the quality of life and economy for the people who live, work, and visit here. That's the sustainable future I'm working to deliver.

Environmental redevelopment can be coupled with the restoration projects of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) as main strategies of the regional plan update. But action in the form of private redevelopment is not all that is needed or all that is planned by TRPA. Indeed, we propose to address Tahoe's environmental needs through changed land use policies that offer incentives to remove buildings from sensitive stream environment zones that can then be restored, to cluster buildings in town centers so as to create walkable spaces, to reduce land coverage in those town centers, and to develop transportation systems that reduce pollution from our roadway systems.

Lake Tahoe entered a restoration age when we realized that a regulatory approach alone to managing the basin would not be enough to reverse the environmental damage of the past. TRPA, working with other basin partners launched the Lake Tahoe EIP in the mid-90s, a program of investment in environmental restoration projects. Everyone from the county and city public works departments to private homeowners have been important partners in the EIP over the last 10 to 15 years through stormwater control project and BMP retrofitting. The projects you are helping to implement continue to be crucial to our environment and our local economy. These projects are improving the environment and creating jobs in the process.

The EIP combined with environmental redevelopment are two key tools proposed in TRPA's Regional Plan update. So what's the next step? After years of public input from all sectors, we are moving forward to bring a package to TRPA's Governing Board as part of a renewed plan for the region.

A pitched battle

What you may not know but need to is that a pitched philosophical battle is looming large in the basin and the battlefield may be TRPA. Behind this relatively simple conceptual plan for Tahoe – a robust partnership of private and public sector investment that strengthens not only the environment but also the economy and social foundation of Tahoe – is an epic philosophical battle for how to get there. We're fearful with the recent round of lawsuits that the organized environmental community has reinvigorated the litigation versus collaboration strategy as the preferred forum to set policy and negotiate environmental constraints. During the next year, TRPA's Governing Board will debate the strategies and the best means to revitalize Tahoe – not only our environment but also by implication Tahoe's economy. The debate has begun. I would urge you to stay informed as the process continues to evolve.

Fixing TRPA

To deliver any of this promise of renewed environmental and economic gain for Tahoe means that TRPA has to allow good projects to happen. Given today's relative state of crisis in Tahoe, you should be aware if you're not already that TRPA is in the midst of long-needed culture change. We are moving to a culture that includes a different ethic of efficiency, accountability, and focus in order to accelerate delivery of environmental gain on the ground.

You all know the history of TRPA and the perception that we're a roadblock to everything. I would ask you to look again. TRPA is changing for the better. Where in the past, saying "no" in the form of stopping or long delaying action used to be the best thing to do for the lake, today's science tells us we must proactively fix what's on the ground to make substantial environmental gain. That means fostering problem solving and partnership building to drive good environmental results. For example, if it takes 10 years to get to project approval for town center redevelopment or if it takes five years to permit a stream restoration project, those are years of lost opportunity and lost environmental gains.

So, I have set in motion a new Strategic Plan for TRPA. I am remaking our internal structure, our culture, and our business practices. Tahoe cannot afford to do nothing. Doing nothing assures only further decline, environmentally and economically.

The new TRPA is grounded on four pillars: first environmental gain to achieve threshold attainment. The new TRPA culture I am building moves from a predominant culture of "no" to one of "yes, and here's how to do it responsibly." This "can-do" attitude invites collaboration with people or organizations that have constructive and viable suggestions for how to make changes that eliminate the harmful effects of bad past development and delivers positive results for the environment.

But take note, this new culture is a shift toward responsible action that allows change and puts long needed environmental gain on the ground. It is about allowing for a sustainable Tahoe – not the Tahoe of today with bankruptcies, boarded up buildings, shrinking populations, and massive job losses. Our new strategic approach is grounded in what I believe is this truth: if Tahoe loses its social and economic foundation, no one – not the federal government, not the two states, not local jurisdictions, and not the private sector – will have the financial wherewithal, the political will, or the social willingness to invest in the environmental restoration we need.

There are three other strategic pillars for success. We are growing our community engagement and improving public service. As you all know, the permitting process can be complicated at Lake Tahoe, and we have begun the work needed to streamline our permitting timelines and processes. We have rules for a very good reason, but we can and are streamlining our processes. Underpinning all we do at the agency lies our renewed commitment to community engagement. We're now requiring community service of every staff member at TRPA plus we're launching a new customer satisfaction program designed to improve our public service. And lastly we are improving our operational efficiency. By putting in place a new organizational structure that's much more directly based on accountability and performance, we can make more progress on environmental threshold attainment and improve our community relations in the process.

All of these measures are geared to delivering more environmental gain in the form of water quality improvements and other resource protections around the basin. If you worry these are just words and question the commitment, understand that the TRPA Governing Board endorsed this new strategic direction in July. Our new strategic plan is on our website – please take a look for yourself.

Both TRPA and I need support from you as a member of this community and someone who has so much at stake in this. The crossroads where we find ourselves is real. The socioeconomic statistics don't lie. And no single agency or entity can save Tahoe from economic and environmental demise if we can't help ourselves. TRPA is taking a hard look at itself and changing to meet the times. So, I would ask, when you hear something that doesn't seem right, or you have a suggestion on how we can better work with the community rather than against it, contact me. I am committed to the change needed to allow both the environment and the economy to thrive. I invite you to work with me through collaboration and partnership to collectively tip Tahoe's balance in the right direction. I am putting myself on the line by leading a culture change after 30 years of entrenchment in status quo. TRPA is heading in a new direction because it's what I believe Tahoe needs to survive.

And remember, "Life is a series of great opportunities, well disguised as impossible situations." Please join me in working toward constructive solutions to this next impossible situation.

Joanne Marchetta is the executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency. Visit trpa.org for more information.