

Opinion: Lake Tahoe should take some pointers from Vail

Publisher's note: *This is the second of four days of stories about issues pertaining to Vail.*

By Kathryn Reed

VAIL – After spending the first week of the year in Vail, I was left wondering what would be so bad if Lake Tahoe became the Vail of the Sierra?

It's not a simple answer because of some basic realities.

First, Lake Tahoe doesn't have comparable ski terrain to Vail. Squaw comes the closest, but it's no Vail.



Vail makes it easy to be a pedestrian.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

Second, the Lake Tahoe region is so much larger, diverse and spread out than the Vail Valley.

Third, Vail the mountain was developed and then the town at the base of it. In Tahoe, most resorts sprang up after the communities were developed. This makes the village of Vail seem real. No village in Lake Tahoe seems real. They were created for tourists as some bizarre brainchild of a developer

to make money, not to create a community or true experience for the guest. Go to the villages at Heavenly, Northstar, Squaw (and Mammoth for that matter) and tell me why any local would go there. Then go to Vail or Whistler to see the difference between the world of make believe in the Sierra and world of functionality at those places.

Fourth, Vail is a company town with much of the commercial entities owned by Vail Resorts or a subsidiary of the company. Tahoe is more diverse with corporate ownership.

Vail has gone through what it calls a renaissance in the last decade. And it's not done if Ever Vail, the \$1 billion proposed development by Vail Resorts goes through.

In Lake Tahoe development is stalled – the convention center and Sierra Colina on the South Shore, Homewood on the West Shore, the Biltmore on the North Shore.

Regulations have something to do with all of that. The Vail Valley doesn't have anything like a Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.

Better planning also led to completion of projects in Vail, including a Four Seasons opening last month. They got the players in a room, made decisions, hashed out compromises, created consensus and moved forward. It wasn't easy. Nothing worth doing ever is.

In Tahoe, decisions are made and then lawsuits are filed – and then nothing happens. In Tahoe, personal agendas take priority over what is good for the majority. Lake Tahoe recycles people who aren't professionals or the best in their field, which leaves the area mired in mediocrity.

Why would Tahoe want to be Vail?

- Vail has free bus service. It always has been. It was so incredibly convenient to use. They even have bus symbols at

the stops so people know what it is, unlike the South Shore, which has BlueGo on the signs and no symbol. What is a BlueGo?

According to Mike Rose, transportation manager for Vail, "The bus system carries 3.2 million riders per year at a cost of about \$3.2 million. The operating costs are covered by a 4 percent lift ticket tax paid to the town by Vail Associates. Capital replacement is paid for by the town general fund and a small amount of federal grants through the 5309 program.

"The bus service provides 76,000 hours of service per year within the incorporated city limits. There are six routes on the outlying and one in town shuttle. Service is every seven to 30 minutes depending on the route, time of day and season. Our longest route is East Vail at 12 miles round trip, West Vail is 10 miles, all others are in the four to five mile roundtrip range."

- Vail excels in customer service. Walking into Two Elk, the mid-mountain lodge at Vail, people hand everyone a tissue, asking them how their day is.

People say "please," "thank you," "May I help you?" "Please come back." This is the same level of service I remember from five years ago.

The bar where ski instructors hang out was every bit as friendly as Beano's Cabin, the high-end dinner restaurant at Beaver Creek. It's a level of service that is rare in Lake Tahoe.

As someone once said, "You only have one chance to make a first impression."

Good service should not be reserved for tourists. I want it as a local.

- It's walkable. Some in Vail don't like the heated sidewalks, saying a ski town should have some snow on the walkways in

winter. Maybe for ambiance that's true, but I'll take their walkways over our ice slicks any day.

- The Vail Valley dining options continue to grow, with Edwards on the far side, about 12 miles away, becoming a hot spot. Choices run the gamut from reasonable to outrageous. The diversity is astonishing.

The town of Vail has a population of about 5,000 people. South Lake Tahoe is about five times as large. But Vail's town manager, Stan Zemler, says, "The budget is equivalent to (a city the with) 25,000 to 30,000 and the staffing because it swells on any given day to those numbers."

At the end of the day, though, I don't want any part of Lake Tahoe to totally recreate itself as Vail. Lake Tahoe is special. It's one of a kind in its own way. The problem is that it is not functioning on all cylinders.

Tahoe's economy is tourism. People who say we need a second economy are blowing hot air. Tourism, people, that's our economic base. It's not going to change. Cottage industries may crop up, but they will be a distant second to tourism.

But tourist areas run the gamut. What does Tahoe want to be? What does it want to look like? Who is going to live here full time? Who is going to visit? Will they return – why or why not? Maybe we need to ask what it is we are striving for? When will enough be enough? Will we ever have enough in the bank? Is there a magic number for when we have attracted the right number of tourists?

If money is the driving force and the end goal, then becoming a destination resort with high-end lodging is a must, along with complementary restaurants and retail. If we just concentrate on the drive-up market, it is going to strain our resources with overcrowding. Vail calls them brown baggers.

If recreation is the driving force and end goal, then someone

ought to ask the U.S. Forest Service as land owner of much of the playground in the basin just how much more human traffic the terrain can handle. USFS officials have told me they are at capacity, especially in the summer. If we want more people on the lake, what does that do to the eco-system?

If a pristine lake is the goal, it's bound to bankrupt all the jurisdictions and reward the wealthy developers who can afford to implement the environmental regulations. The elephant in the room no one acknowledges is the EIP – environmental improvement program. Billions of dollars are being spent on it. For what? Lake clarity is great, but restoring the basin to pre-settlement conditions is a farce and inane goal of the powers that be. People live here. Accept it.

Vail isn't perfect, but it knows what it is and whom it wants to attract. At the end of the day, I guess I would like Lake Tahoe to be a bit more like Vail if it means knowing who we are and who we want as our customers.

ngg_shortcode_0_placeholder (Click on photos to enlarge.)