

Subtle sign changes designed to help drivers in S. Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

What people may begin to notice as they drive around South Lake Tahoe is something is missing.

But what?

Clutter. Clutter in the form of signs.



Signs are changing in South Tahoe to help motorists find things easier.

Photo/Provided

“Wayfinding is intended to be an intuitive way to find your way around the community. It is not intended to be glaring or offensive,” explained B Gorman, executive director of the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce.

This collage of signs shows what led to the desire to make changes. Gorman said it’s the absence of visual clutter people will notice most.

Her group helped spearhead the challenge to bring uniformity to signs throughout the South Shore, with the El Dorado side

the first to implement the program. The chamber took Carl Ribaud, a marketing specialist on the South Shore, up on his idea this was something the community needed.

South Lake Tahoe put \$66,000 toward the project and El Dorado County \$42,500.

It is just now that signs are popping up in town even though the project started being discussed in spring 2007. A major cog in the wheel of progression is a state highway runs through the middle of town. Caltrans and NDOT have particular rules about signage on state highways.

NDOT, according to Gorman, would not proceed until its California counterpart took action. When NDOT may consider wayfinding again is not known.

"We tried to explain to Caltrans we are different," Nancy Kerry said. Kerry worked on the program while employed by the chamber and then when she was hired by South Lake Tahoe.

That difference is that in addition to regular signage on a state highway, the small towns that dot these roads also need to let people know where things like the library, marina and beaches are.

"It was exciting when Caltrans said we can make this work," Kerry said. "They are separating the town destinations from the highway destination needs."

What won't be seen on the highway signs are lots of color and fun symbols like what San Francisco has with an icon of Italy pointing to North Beach and a crab for Fisherman's Wharf.

The city may be able to get more creative with signs that are not on the highway, and to possibly incorporate an alpine motif.

But the ski resort and marina symbols people are accustomed to will remain, but incorporated into that uniform look.

“It’s important to bring some consistency in sign style because when you are traveling down the road, if there are a lot of different signs, whatever the message is gets lost because you have to read so many things,” Kerry said. “If there is consistency in size, color, font and style, then you only notice what has changed, which is content. You can get to where you are going faster and easier.”

The new signs are cleaner, more uniform. The 22 signs Caltrans approved are slated to be in place before the Amgen Tour de California bike race in mid-May that starts in South Lake Tahoe.

“It makes the community look more appealing for the visitor and residents,” Gorman said of wayfinding.