

Opinion: Linking transportation to lake clarity

By Joanne Marchetta

Since the dawn of time, transportation has been a driver of human culture. From the onset of wheeled carts in 3,500 BC to air and high-speed rail travel today, humanity has relied on transportation to live, work, play and thrive.

It's no different at Lake Tahoe present-day. With private automobiles the transportation mode of choice for most local residents and visitors, our roadways have come to define our communities for better or worse.



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At Lake Tahoe, what happens on land, especially on our roads, affects the health and clarity of the lake. Recent scientific research has proven the main cause for the lake's transparency loss is fine sediment runoff which is carried to the lake by roadways. During the winter, the challenge is even greater because the sand and salt we use to keep our roadways safe are entering our watershed – all you need to do is look around at the dirty snow along our streets and highways to see the problem.

What are we doing about it?

A few weeks ago, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's Governing Board voted unanimously to prioritize the update of our Regional Plan on a few key areas:

- Protecting water quality and lake clarity
- Improving land use planning, air quality, and transportation
- Addressing catastrophic threats such as wildfire and invasive species
- Implementing a sustainability framework that addresses climate change issues.

Transportation issues are embedded within all of these high priorities. How and where we locate homes and businesses affects our traffic patterns which in turn affects the lake. Ozone pollution caused by traffic congestion is also harmful to human health, affecting the lungs and heart, especially in children. Our Regional Plan update is addressing these issues while at the same time work is under way with many partner agencies to tackle the transportation challenges at Lake Tahoe.

Here are some highlights:

- Using better street sweepers – TRPA is working with local governments to help fund the highest efficiency street sweepers on the market. Just this month, we're distributing local project mitigation funds to South Lake Tahoe to purchase sweepers to keep fine sediments out of the lake. You can also see one soon in Incline Village.
- Providing continuous bike trails – there are major bike trail projects in the planning pipeline to give locals and visitors alternatives to their cars. The South Tahoe Greenway Shared-Trail Project, the Sawmill II Bike Trail project, and the El Dorado Beach to Ski Run Trail are just three of many

bike trail projects in the works. Partner agencies like the California Tahoe Conservancy, South Lake Tahoe and El Dorado County are the lead agencies working diligently with us on these projects.

- Planning projects – our partner agency, the Tahoe Transportation District, is targeting five important transportation infrastructure projects:

- Nevada Stateline to Stateline Bikeway Project
- Highway 50 Stateline Corridor Project
- Lake Tahoe Waterborne Transit Service and Landside Facility Project
- Highways 431/28 Operational/Safety Improvement Project
- Highways 89/89 Realignment-Fanny Bridge Project.

These “big 5” projects would go a long way toward redefining transportation in the Tahoe Basin over the next 15 years and could curb traffic congestion and reduce auto emissions while at the same time delivering water quality benefits. Another project that’s been 10 years in the making is the Highway 50 Caltrans project from Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard. This project is scheduled to break ground this year and will help us create a safer, more walkable and bikeable community on the South Shore.

With approximately 3 million visitors coming to Lake Tahoe per year, most still by car, transportation choices can meaningfully influence our environment and quality-of-life. Many of our visitors arrive from the Bay Area, where drivers waste nearly 60 hours per year in congestion, according to a national 2009 Urban Mobility Report. While our traffic backups here in Tahoe are generally confined to peak holiday weekends, long lines of vehicles on clogged roadways are not what we should accept for Lake Tahoe.

The Bi-State Compact creating TRPA mandates we reduce our dependence on the private automobile. This mandate is an extraordinarily high bar to reach and can be achieved only through partnerships, perseverance and public support. And building partnerships and public support are TRPA's two new focus areas for delivering environmental gain on the ground at Lake Tahoe. The delivery of critical transportation infrastructure projects will create a foundation to help rebuild our economy and reinvigorate our communities all while protecting Lake Tahoe.

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