

Tahoe Fund aims to be conduit to bring cash to basin

By Katherine E. Hill

The nonprofit Tahoe Fund will announce funding for its first basin project at a fundraising dinner on Lake Tahoe's West Shore next week. The Tahoe Fund, formed about a year ago, plans to raise much-needed funds for projects in the Lake Tahoe Basin identified by TRPA's environmental improvement program that would otherwise go unfunded.

The Tahoe Fund's kick-off dinner at West Shore Café will feature guests of honor Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., and her husband Rick Blum, one of the original contributors who sparked the formation of the fund, said board chairwoman Cindy Gustafson, who is general manager of the Tahoe City Public Utility District.

The idea behind the Tahoe Fund was to look at the basin as a whole and identify projects that need funding and then work to raise those funds, Gustafson said.



Tahoe Fund is designed to bring money to the basin for environmental and recreation projects.

Photo/LTN file

“There’s the Tahoe Rim Trail Association fund raising for the Tahoe Rim Trail, and there’s SWEP (Sierra Water Education Partnerships) raising funds for education projects in schools, but there’s not one doing a broader spectrum for the TRPA’s EIP,” Gustafson said.

The EIP, or environmental improvement program, was formed following the 1997 Presidential Forum that brought a renewed commitment to preserving Lake Tahoe’s ecosystem. EIP projects target watersheds, forestation, air quality, transportation, recreation and much more through a \$2.45 billion plan to protect Lake Tahoe, but much of the projects lack the funding to make them a reality. The Tahoe Fund’s goal is become that funding partner, Gustafson says.

“We thought a nonprofit focused on those sort of projects would resonate with donors, with locals, and with foundations that would fund a nonprofit, but not a government agency,” she said. “We could be the intermediary to donate to large projects.”

Projects targeted by the Tahoe Fund will come from three areas: conservation, recreation and environmental education/stewardship, which could translate to projects like bike trails, interpretive programs, lakeside parks and restoration work. The fund will not perform any of the work on the projects, rather it will raise funds to pay for the projects through private donations, grant writing and other fundraising methods.

“People want to fund something that they can see and touch and feel,” Gustafson said about the types of projects the Fund will target.

The board was already identified a laundry list of projects in its Project Portfolio that lack the necessary funding. The

portfolio, which can be found online, includes basinwide projects such as restoration work in Glenbrook; boat parking and accessibility work at Sand Harbor; Lake Tahoe bike projects around the lake; an ADA-accessible path and fishing platform at Spooner Lake; interpretive signage; a Tahoe Atlas that will be a collection of scientific information; Upper Truckee River and Incline Creek restoration; Tahoe Rim Trail projects; and much more.

The first projects identified for initial funding will be announced at the Aug. 15 \$300-per-plate dinner.

Gustafson credits the idea behind the Tahoe Fund to Patrick Wright, executive director of the California Tahoe Conservancy and a board member of the fund. His idea was to form a "sister nonprofit group" to a government agency, in this case the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, to fund projects in the basin. The Tahoe Fund is modeled after similar nonprofits like The Yosemite Fund.

"When I first arrived in the basin about five years ago, it struck me that the Conservancy didn't have a nonprofit partner," Wright said, citing similar nonprofit partnerships with Yosemite and Golden Gate national parks. "I said let's see if we can pull something together in the basin.

"The Tahoe Fund can focus on a broad range of conservation and recreation projects," Wright said. "There's been a tremendous interest and people are attracted to on-the-ground projects. We're going to focus on projects that are ready to go, that are visible and that have support ... projects that people can use and enjoy."

Years of discussions about a way to see basinwide projects funded led to a meeting about a year ago that became the kick off for the Tahoe Fund with a significant contribution from Blum, and a challenge from Feinstein to "provide her with the private part to partner with the federal agency to fund these

projects," Gustafson said.

The first year has been focused on logistics, Gustafson said, with the naming of the board, which includes many high-profile Tahoe residents and second homeowners, business people and conservationists, along with significant fundraising and identifying projects for the fund's initial funding cycling.

The 17-member board of directors includes many high-profile board members, but Gustafson stresses that it draws from a broad spectrum of the community.

"The board has both private individuals, private business people, as well as public officials, conservationist and environmentalists ... we're trying to balance the board," she said. The board also includes second homeowners and people with public policy background.

Among the board members are Allen Biaggi, the immediate past chair of the TRPA Governing Board; Art Chapman, president of JMA Ventures, which owns Alpine and Homewood ski areas; Jim Boyd, who serves on the California Energy Commission; Blaise Carrig, co-president of Vail Resorts, which owns Heavenly and Northstar-at-Tahoe; entrepreneurs Dan Eaton and Roger Wittenberg; Jim Lawrence, administrator of the Nevada Division of State Lands; Andy Wirth, CEO of Squaw Valley; and environmentalists Cory Ritchie and Trish Ronald, among others.

The fund has been in a major fundraising drive since May, Gustafson said, and the board hopes to close its Founders' Circle campaign by the end of the year. And, with donations from board members and a grant from the California Tahoe Conservancy, the Fund should have operating expenses for the next two to four years, which will then allow them to focus on funding projects in the basin. The Tahoe Fund currently has a few part-time staff members and hopes to eventually add full-time staff, but the goal is to keep overhead low, Gustafson said.

Lake Tahoe Summit

The Tahoe Fund also is the organizing sponsor the 15th Annual Tahoe Summit on Aug. 16 hosted by Feinstein at Homewood Mountain Resort from 9 to 11:30am. California Gov. Jerry Brown and Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval are expected to attend this year's summit; the first time governors from both states have attended since 1997. Along with Feinstein, speakers will likely include Sens. Harry Reid, D-Nev., and Dean Heller, R-Nev., as well as other federal, state and local officials.

The theme of this year's Tahoe Summit is "Stewardship and Sustainability in Challenging Fiscal Times." Family oriented activities including a youth art contest and interactive displays will take place at the summit. The summit is free to attend and is open to the public.