

Future of planning in Tahoe basin coming into focus

By Kathryn Reed

Artists' renderings of what Tahoe could look like are on easels. Talk is about not having a cookie cutter approach to planning. What might be allowed in one area won't necessarily be permitted in another. Incentives to rid sensitive land of development and instead concentrate redevelopment in central locations are goals.

For those who were around during the placed-based planning sessions of 2005 and 2006, the message of Wednesday's meeting sounded like something that should have happened six months, maybe a year after those meetings came to a close.

Those gatherings six and seven years ago were to give input into the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency's update of the Regional Plan. That was supposed to be finalized in 2007. Now the target date is December 2012, with the draft of the environmental documents slated for release March 28.



TRPA Executive
Director
Joanne
Marchetta on
Feb. 8 outlines
proposed
changes to the

Regional Plan.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

While some point to the Angora Fire of June 2007 and then the attention being turned to all-things fire, as well as the shorezone plan as reasons the Regional Plan update got derailed, the overriding reasons are people couldn't even decide what should be studied in the environmental impact statement or the process to get there. Despite scoping sessions being under way in fall 2007 regarding the EIS, the process got hijacked by special interest groups.

Fast forward to Feb. 8, 2012, to a room at Lake Tahoe Community College filled with more than 70 people. TRPA Executive Director Joanne Marchetta is talking about how what is coming down the pike is part philosophical, part practical change.

Keeping the lake in the forefront

Lake clarity remains the driving force for what will be allowed to occur. But with the basin nearly built out, the emphasis isn't on stopping growth – that has been achieved – but on smart redevelopment.

“We got so good at stopping things in the 1980s that we locked the status quo in place,” Marchetta said.

She talks about the need to balance the environment, economy and community interests. The triple bottom line is what her predecessor called it.

Doing nothing will keep Lake Tahoe's clarity on the downhill path, she said.

But spending a billion dollars in the last 10 years hasn't helped it either.

“The emphasis in the Regional Plan, unlike the last one, is fixing the built environment,” Marchetta said.

The mantra from all regulatory agencies is the built environment needs to be improved. Fifteen percent of the Lake Tahoe Basin is privately owned. Of that, Marchetta said, 1 percent is the main contributor to Tahoe’s decrease in clarity.

Walk near the shoreline and so much is brown instead of “blue”.

Seventy-two percent of the fine sediment reaching the lake is from the built environment, including roads. Marchetta gave the example of people needing to sweep their garages. That is fine sediment picked up from area roads that eventually reaches the lake.

Local control

While none of the information above is new, what could be new if the Governing Board approves the Regional Plan update and no one files a lawsuit to stop it, is creating an arena where doing small or large scale projects are not time- or cost-prohibitive because of the permitting process.

What the committee putting together the Regional Plan wants to do is allow the five counties and one city in the basin to develop local plans, have the TRPA approve them, and then most individual projects would never need a TRPA permit. Bigger items, like Homewood, would still undergo TRPA scrutiny.

Julie Regan with the TRPA told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting that these community plans would differ from the current community plans and/or plan area statements because the bi-state regulatory agency would approve them based on what winds up in the Regional Plan update. Then individual projects only need permitting by the local entity – not TRPA.

The six jurisdictions will have about a year to file a letter of intent with TRPA to create the plans. If that isn't done, then the TRPA will be the permit issuer. Time lines are not finalized as to when the plans would need to be completed.

To avoid the one-size fits all approach like the current Regional Plan, the committee is looking at allowing height and density variances from one area of the basin to another. For instance, a 96-foot high building might be allowed on the South Shore, but not in Tahoe City.

Local entities have been clamoring for more say in what their communities look like.

But some local politicians want more say in what goes on. (Only one elected official was at the Feb. 8 meeting – an LTCC board member.)

At the Feb. 7 South Lake Tahoe City Council meeting, Bruce Grego said there would be no way he would vote for the Regional Plan if the issue of drive-through windows is not addressed.

Supposedly that topic is being put on a "to-do list", but won't be an item in the update. As it stands now, no new drive-throughs are allowed. The longtime theory is idling cars are problem.

Arlo Stockham, TRPA regional planning coordinator, told the council on Tuesday, "In the area plan you will be developing, you can have drive-up windows. The EIS is not analyzing regionwide impacts of that change. It would require delaying the process or supplemental review."

"This year people in the basin get justice or it's the end of TRPA," Grego said.

That statement is in reference to Nevada Senate Bill 271 that would have the Silver State pull out of the bi-state Compact

if changes are not made.

What's next

On Feb. 15 the TRPA goes to the Tahoe City Yacht Club at 6pm for a similar meeting to the one at LTCC. A week later, there will be a meeting in Incline Village about the Regional Plan update. Time and location are still being worked out.

March 28 the draft of the environmental documents for the Regional Plan will be released at the Governing Board meeting. People will have 60 days to comment.

In December, the Regional Plan is expected to be voted on by the Governing Board. Any litigation that might be filed must be done so within 60 days.