

Opinion: Lake Tahoe's future depends on Regional Plan update

By Joanne Marchetta

While spring can be elusive at Lake Tahoe, the calendar reminds us that warmer days are approaching. Earth Day is just around the corner. So it seems fitting that the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is rolling out an updated vision for the future of Tahoe where the lake and our communities are restored and sustainable.

With the advent of Earth Day in 1970, the environmental movement took shape and began to form my views. In my youth, I believed that people damaged the natural landscape and should be kept out of exceptional places. I still have a passion for the environment, but over a 30-year career, my youthful views are now more nuanced. I've grown to see that striking a sustainable balance where people and communities live in harmony within the natural environment as a fully functioning system is a necessity.



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At Tahoe, our system is out of balance. The lake's clarity has been degraded by past development in what we know now were sensitive lands and our highway network transports polluted

runoff into streams or directly into Lake Tahoe. Our economy is in freefall and our communities are struggling. But we have an opportunity to restore balance to the system, which is the theme of our Regional Plan update.

On April 25-26, TRPA will release an updated draft Regional Plan. Public hearings and workshops are scheduled in May to explain what the updates mean for the future of Lake Tahoe. Word of mouth about its contents is traveling fast. Despite some of the rhetoric you may hear to the contrary, the plan could ultimately become a model for communities around the world. I hope you'll keep in mind the overarching objective is to restore Lake Tahoe and deliver other environmental gains through a host of policy changes such as incentives for environmental redevelopment and the removal of existing development from our most sensitive areas.

First, the Tahoe basin is nearly "built out" and development caps and other existing growth control measures are staying in place under the draft plan. The draft does not propose any substantial new development rights. There are only about 4,000 development rights left of the basin's approximately 50,000 parcels. The rate of development allocations to local governments is proposed to change very little through the update. In the draft alternative proposed by TRPA, a maximum of 2,600 standard residential allocations and 200,000 square feet of new commercial floor area is proposed for distribution over a 20-year period as long as environmental improvements continue.

The carrying capacities of the Tahoe basin are well defined and there are no blank checks being written to developers. All types of land uses in the basin will remain capped. No new tourist accommodation allocations would be created since enough already exist in the region for today's market and there are approximately 300 unused tourist units remaining from the current plan that are carrying over. What this means is that to redevelop tourist units in most cases would require

that they be removed from elsewhere and the site restored. To keep environmental improvements on pace, we need to become adept at doing more with less.

Without some modest policy changes, the next 20 years could lock in the status quo of our built environment, which is an outcome we can't afford in terms of lake restoration or community revitalization. Amendments to TRPA's land use regulations in town centers are a key component of our focused strategy to encourage the redevelopment of older, polluting properties. Proven incentives for walkable town centers include allowing the appropriate height, density, and mix of uses.

Here is what is proposed. Four-story buildings would be allowed in most of the basin's town centers just as they currently are today. From Ski Run to Stateline in South Lake Tahoe, six-story buildings would be allowed just as already exist around the Heavenly gondola. And on the four parcels containing the South Shore casino properties, the existing height would be grandfathered in if renovations deliver other environmental benefits and reduce land coverage. No changes to height or compactness standards are proposed outside town centers.

Most development in the Tahoe basin occurred before TRPA's current Regional Plan was adopted. The land coverage system has had the unintended consequence of locking grandfathered coverage rights in place. If land coverage rights could be transferred anywhere within the Tahoe basin, versus in the immediate watershed area under today's rules, crucial relocation of pavement, roads and buildings from the most sensitive lands to more appropriate, non-sensitive properties could result.

Outside Lake Tahoe's town centers – in the places we walk, hike and bike – few changes are planned other than continued protections and restoration. But certain recreation areas such

as Heavenly have highly disturbed base areas that are in need of environmental redevelopment. TRPA is proposing changes to allow skier accommodations and employee housing if plans and projects can demonstrate a net environmental benefit.

Every person who cares for our lake and communities needs to have a clear understanding of the issues and proposals in order to help shape Lake Tahoe's future. TRPA's Governing Board is scheduled to act on the final plan at the end of 2012. To be engaged in the Plan, go online or send comments and questions to regionalplaninfo@trpa.org.

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