

Opinion: Is sustainability collaborative in Lake Tahoe?

By Garry Bowen

In our most recent Monthly Message from the Mayor, Her Honor Claire Fortier made a serious point for all of us with regards to TRPA's hallowed threshold program. As TRPA has relied upon those thresholds as justification for so long they are known as sacred cow' to some of the very people who oversee them, it was refreshing to have someone at a certain level admit that there may be a "fundamental flaw" in basing basin planning on them.

I thank Claire for this brave acknowledgment.

Her preceding sentence, just before the comma sharing that enlightened thought, was this: "thresholds were never intended to include humans in the mix", bringing the long-term stresses into perspective as we enter the era of the Sustainability Collaborative. There were quite a number of people who showed up at the first Sustainability Collaborative meeting at Lake Tahoe Community College on Monday: from South Shore, Incline Village, and as far as Truckee – but was sparsely attended by anyone from other North Shore places, nor any from ethnic communities.



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That, in facilitator Michael Ward's view, needs to be

rectified in the near future.

In being thankful to Claire for her clarity with regards to her view of the threshold issue, I have to say that that view substantiates something that has been ever-present in my rear-view mirror for awhile now, a focused personal mantra for Tahoe's future: "policies equal to the scenery".

That phrase has captivated me since I read "Community and the Politics of Place", (University of Oklahoma Press, 1990) by the renowned former mayor of Missoula, Mont., Daniel Kemmis. With all the strife represented by the "knock down, drag-out" nature of fighting over Lake Tahoe's beauty and ownership, we still don't have those – but hopefully they may finally be on the horizon.

Is sustainability going to provide policies equal to the scenery? Given the fragmented nature of the numerous other agency silos here, the brilliance of Claire's comment resides in the fact that one must be aware of the problem to do anything about it, and she has in fact isolated it: if thresholds were never intended for humans to be "included in the mix", then that might lead to a simple, fundamental comprehension of sustainability's role – it is essentially about human behavior and its impact, ironically the same rationale for TRPA's very existence, although its focus has morphed a bit to claim ownership for Tahoe's clarity.

That all other agencies focus on that, too, to mollify stepping on toes is in itself mystifying. What fell through the cracks over the years is the populace's own awareness of their surroundings, as they've been preoccupied with relying on their taxes to pay the agencies to take care of "those things" for them.

As sustainability is about human behavior and its impact, it is, and should be, a short but simple step to: if we change the behavior, we lessen the impact – conversely, if we don't

change, the impacts will continue (to our continued detriment). This thought necessarily includes human wellbeing, as well as those of other species, so change should be a clear choice, but of what? Water, air, nutrition, ecosystems and habitats, the increasing need for pharmaceutical solutions, and overall human equity issues are all sustainability concerns, but here are mostly couched as merely about a better economy, as if that in itself will solve all those other things right along with it. This should not be thought of in such limited terms, as it is a much more rewarding and fun challenge to oneself to learn in what ways man has outdone himself, and in discovering simple solutions, all based on what nature has already been providing us.

That TRPA is considered the “villain-in-the-piece” can now be considered irrelevant, as it can be much more rewarding to understand and take responsibility for one’s own choices of behavior and their impact (in fact the only real way to impact the impact). Sustainable ways are truly very important.

The Sustainability Collaborative takes on the mantle of savior of a lackluster, in the doldrums, long-in-the-tooth community structure hoping to revive our fortunes towards some sort of future we won’t otherwise have – a noble and worthwhile endeavor if ever there was one.

Will this collaborative succeed, when others have dwindled or themselves become irrelevant: will its’ grasp equal its’ reach?

Former Sacramento Mayor Heather Fargo made an interesting kick-off speaker, as she is now the executive director of California’s new Strategic Growth Council, the agency purportedly responsible for executing the principles inherent in AB32, California’s now-famous climate change Initiative, and SB375, the so-called Sustainable Community Strategy. That sustainability might be about significantly more than reducing automobile usage (think air quality along with reducing

emissions) means the idea is given short shrift, given how many cars are actually in California, and given the sheer number of people who will need to change behavior. There is much more to human behavior than just driving – that idea alone might be a lot to absorb, given how much time Californians devote to it each day, of delight to OPEC, and their minions.

In her new role, Ms. Fargo spoke of communities needing to have design professionals who “understand what smart growth is”, and that she expected Tahoe to perform (sort of in a “policies equal to the scenery” way) in “so significant” a fashion that they might be eligible for an “international award”.

She herself was refreshing, as she faced the attendees in a relaxed, conversational way – one particularly interesting point was about all the Federal government ownership here: “you needn’t feel any guilt about approaching them for funds”, as a number like 85 percent means that, with so much of the land agency-owned, they don’t contribute to the local tax revenues anyway.

Interesting thought, lost on most here – due to the constant drumbeat as to how important they all are.

Patrick Wright, executive director of the California Tahoe Conservancy, was quite eloquent in following Ms. Fargo, as he envisioned a Tahoe much more than what it is today, and asked attendees about “re-thinking community”, to assist in re-energizing Tahoe’s potential, which to my biased mind sounded like a plea, once again, for “policies equal to the scenery”.

No mention was made of his co-creation of the Tahoe Fund, apparently created to attract the now ubiquitous idea of public-private partnerships, as if the corporate world will supplant the funds now diminishing from the sale of Federal land in Las Vegas, and we will be all the better for it if

they do.

So far, I have seen no recognition that vitality will require other than agency thinking, as most answer to someone elsewhere. The most prominent examples of public-private partnerships here are in the ski industry, so with the nascent Olympic effort (aborted now three times, starting with 2014, to 2018 upon the award to Whistler (2010), to the current 2022 idea, given the Olympic Committee goings-on) the fact that the ski industry is exceedingly well represented on the Tahoe Fund board in itself gives short-shrift to any seasonal direction other than winter. This makes any sustainable effort accountable for all seasons, as it should be, but the lack of vitality vision puts strong responsibility on this volunteer effort, however well intended.

Apparently, the fact that the collaborative has now received almost \$2 million in funding for the next few years is calming any fear of failure, as Tahoe is now so well known for, along with, and due to, its pattern of strife and inappropriate inaction. As this is to be a volunteer effort, what does that pay for?

The very real current challenge is on the malfunctioning status quo to brave some of their own demons in abandoning a hold on the "way we do things around here", as it will require more than a few hundred people participating in a Sustainability Collaborative to mitigate impact enough to satisfy agency goals.

This is true also because the agencies represented in the supposed Partnership for Sustainable Communities have all been given more-or-less a "right of first refusal" to anything brought forth by the collaborative, as they themselves are not participating in the collaborative in any meaningful way, other than to field the ideas generated by the community volunteers for their use. That may not be sustainable, nor will it garner the innovative qualities necessary for

transformation – a term now lost in the shuffle of agency survival. The concept of the wolf guarding the henhouse unfortunately comes to mind, as does the phrase “good enough for government”.

This column started with the mayor, and will end with the mayor, as she herself was the first chair of the city’s own Sustainability Commission, created after the adoption of the Sustainable Action Plan in 2008, now approaching the type of time span that got TRPA in such hot water, not completing their 20-year Regional Plan update in 20 years, by being almost six years late? S.A.P. – 4 years?

Would a Sustainability Collaborative even have been necessary had a stronger stance been taken to encourage success for South Lake Tahoe’s own – and set standards high enough for anyone to emulate?

The answer to that is pure sustainability: nature has for millions of years operated in complexity (a tree, a bird, a snake, water, soil, photosynthesis, a wolf, a butterfly – all somehow end up working together; man, however, complicates himself, so much around him, so many other species, the air currents, the ocean currents – that Tahoe can indeed play a role in transformation that others can emulate, be a much better place to be, in becoming a model – but of what?

Sustainability can be a joyous antidote to our complications, as the best forms handle nature’s complexity in a simple, elegant, and profound way, without complication; Lake Tahoe and folks who choose to live here deserve no less, so that others will enjoy joining us, at no additional cost but much considerable benefit. That is in the true spirit of collaboration.

Garry Bowen has a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water

*efficiencies, and public health. He may be reached at
tahoefuture@gmail.com or (775) 690.6900.*