

Opinion: S. Tahoe turns deaf ear to younger generation

By Scott Valentine

I spoke at the South Lake Tahoe Planning Commission meeting on Nov. 29 to make some comments on the Harrison Avenue Streetscape Project. There was one other person in the audience beside myself. After making some suggestions about the bikeability and walkability of this area, I was asked: "If there are so many people who believe in these ideas and solutions, where are they now?"



Scott
Valentine

I should have told the commission that the reason is simple: They're at work!

OK, maybe I'm overreacting, but I felt like it was inappropriate and disrespectful to devalue someone's comment based on the number of attendees at 3 on a Thursday afternoon.

I'm in my late 30s; people my age are spending time trying to manage a family and juggle work, while simultaneously trying to squeak in some world-class play wherever they can so they can justify living in such a junky town. Sorry. I'm not a snob, but this is the dumpiest place I have ever lived, surrounded by the best place I have ever lived.

I recently found a *Tahoe Daily Tribune* article from 1977 that stated that one of the top priorities for City Council was the beautification of Highway 50. So I understand change is slow, either that or our idea of beauty in 1977 was very disappointing.

I was on the steering committee that helped to re-create the beach at Lakeview Commons so I feel like there are a few people doing what they can to fix the dumpy parts. However, one of the public comments we received while trying to improve this area was: "Stop changing our town!" It seems as though the public is as much at fault as our political leaders for slowing positive improvements.

I felt like a fool after speaking in front of the commission that day in November, and I walked away feeling ... alone? Not alone in sentiment, because I know there are a lot of people out there that would like to improve the standard of living in this town, but alone in involvement, participation, or unification around a common goal maybe.

The makeup of our city government is not a fair representation of our town and therefore does not accurately represent the views of our town. So why are active young professionals in this town so underrepresented? We are constantly talking about positive change, sustainability, and community vision, but seriously lack the time and energy to get involved. Maybe this apathy can be explained because we think the older generation in this town is set in their ways, fearful of change, and unwilling to listen to a bunch of young, educated radicals. Guess what? We make up a very large percentage of this town, and right now we are inheriting the mistakes currently being set upon us simply because we don't have the time to get involved. This is unacceptable.

I focused my frustrations and decided to apply for the recent appointment to City Council. It was made very clear during the interview process that the current council was looking for

“qualified” and experienced applicants. It is ignorant of the community and the council to think that our generation is not “qualified” in making informed decisions regarding our town. I lost the appointment after a three-way tie with two older, more “qualified” ex-council members. I hope their qualifications enable them to make decisions that are more representative of the newer, younger demographic prevalent in our town. Is this recent decision by council somehow sending a message to new candidates that this old mentality will never change? I should hope not.

I applaud Trish Hickson and Jason Drew for stepping up to serve on the city Planning Commission. Others should follow their lead and help guide positive improvements for our city. Is this a call to action for the next generation? Yes! We need better representation in this town and we need to show that we are ready to do something about it. It won't be easy, but we need to show people that the “Stop changing our town” mentality and this short-term vision is not an option.

In the short time that I was campaigning for the vacant seat on City Council people continually mentioned that if the college would only convert to a four-year university we would be able to save our town. The college plays a huge role in bringing people together and has done a lot to revitalize this community, but people also need to understand that the people of this community and the City Council have the capacity to save our town as well ... they just haven't done it yet.

With the passing of the [Tahoe Regional Planning Agency] Regional Plan update more power will be returned to local government. The city has an opportunity to prove that it is ready to move forward with sustainable economic development while balancing both community needs and environmental protection. If we do not change our ways and put forth a solid effort to demonstrate that we can conduct ourselves appropriately, we will lose the respect of our community and miss out on this awesome opportunity. How are we currently

showing we are making responsible decisions?

The city of South Lake Tahoe just sold the property on the corner of Ski Run and Highway 50 to a Rite-Aid developer. With decisions like this we are clearly not making any effort to improve the attractiveness of our town, revitalize the economy, or prove to the TRPA we are responsible stewards. No wonder businesses and young professionals are reluctant to stay or perhaps relocate here.

Businesses in South Lake have made it clear that they are not doing well and the economy is suffering. Why then do we continue to use the same old model? Why don't our decision makers think outside the same box they have been planning with for the last 50 years and try something new? How can we achieve economic viability and sustainability if we can't be more creative than just having another Rite-Aid?

Our community is demanding positive change. We want more bike trails and access to the beach. We want diverse shopping and dining opportunities. We want local business to experience economic success. We want to beautify the city and be proud of our town, but this community vision is constantly crushed by the nearsightedness of the City Council and a very small number of our own community members. Instead of a pedestrian-friendly shopping and dining experience with locally unique shops and cafes with a view of the lake we'll have just another Rite-Aid.

There are plenty of other progressive uses for that space, but if this "old economy" mentality keeps up, the educated citizenry and the "high dollar" visitors that this city desperately need will just have to find another town, one that makes a concerted effort to make community desires a priority. It seems as though we can't even do something as simple as banning plastic bags. We are basically telling the world that we are not serious about saving the lake. We need to unify around some common goals and show our city leaders that we are

ready and willing to work to effect change and make difficult decisions that benefit the community in the long term.

Together we can adopt a city vision ... and possibly a region wide goal of making positive improvements... insuring that our generation, and the generations that come after us, aren't going to be disenfranchised with the state of the town being left to them.

Scott Valentine is the head of the Earth Science Department at Lake Tahoe Community College.

--

Publisher's note: The property where Scott Valentine says a Rite-Aid is going is in escrow. It was owned by the city's Redevelopment Agency and had to be sold per state law. The buyer at this time has not been disclosed. And any building that would go on the site would have to be approved by the city and other permitting agencies. None of that has happened. So it is not factual at this time to say what may be built at that location. And the city cannot deny a certain type of business if the use is allowable in that location. It's partly called free market.