

TRPA allocations quashing residential building

By Anne Knowles

Now that the economy is picking up, local jurisdictions and the building industry are counting on the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency to revamp its controversial system for doling out residential building allocations.

Architects and builders says business is beginning to rebound, and local officials say demand for the allocations needed to build on vacant lots is back after languishing for the last four or five years.

At the same time, though, TRPA has cut its maximum allotment of allocations by more than half as part of the many changes made in the Regional Plan update last year.

The contentious topic will get another airing next week when the agency's Governing Board takes it up again at a public meeting in the Chateau at Incline Village.



One of El Dorado County's biggest building seasons was just after the 2007 Angora Fire. Photo/LTN file

"That May 22 meeting is pretty important," said Pat Davison,

executive director of the Contractors Association of Tahoe Truckee in Truckee.

Davison and others hope to convince the TRPA that tests used to determine how many allocations the five counties and city of South Lake Tahoe receive is unfair and is keeping the area from getting the economic shot in the arm it needs.

“The frustration is the economy is showing signs of recovery,” Davison told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The building industry was hit so hard and not to see the full release (of allocations) was surprising and disappointing.”

Last month the board approved the 2013 allocations; the first set since the RPU became official in December. Previously, the TRPA gave out a maximum of 300 annual allocations to the jurisdictions, but this year that was cut by 55 percent to 130.

And the TRPA ended up releasing only 86 of those 130 based on the same system of environmental benchmarks it has used in the past.

“We didn’t get any allocations on our EIP (environmental improvement program) compliance or transit level of service. It’s very difficult to increase that number,” Mimi Moss, community development director for Douglas County, told *Lake Tahoe News*. “The TRPA needs to revisit the allocation process. We’ve all done so much over the year and we’re still penalized.”

The jurisdictions are scored by the TRPA based on four criteria: permit issuance and compliance, best management practices retrofit, EIP implementation and increase in transit level of service.

Douglas County, for example, has a base allocation of five and can receive as many as nine by earning up to four additional enhancement allocations by scoring well on the four criteria.

For 2013, the county received six allocations, garnering just one extra for permit compliance.

Douglas isn't alone, though. All the jurisdictions exceeded their base allocations through permit compliance, but only Washoe County earned allocations in another category, BMP retrofit. None received bonuses for EIP or local transit improvements.

Douglas County's Moss would like to see the counties and city assessed based on other measurements.

"If the jurisdiction is meeting the total daily maximum load, then we should be getting credit of lake clarity," she said.

Davison, the builders' representative, is hoping to convince the board to release all of the allocations and even to consider an advance on next year's pool.

Jeff Cowen, TRPA public information officer, said under the RPU, "We are still on an annual cycle of allocation distribution and do not have any rules that we could distribute in larger amounts or periods."

The performance review system is likely to be re-evaluated next year.

The TRPA, which is dealing with a number of other matters including a lawsuit filed over the RPU, has a long to-do list.

"I know how the bureaucracy works," said Roger Trout, development services division director with El Dorado County. "I'm all behind getting the process updated to be, I wouldn't call it more fair, but maybe more streamlined."

Trout said El Dorado County probably has as many people waiting for allocations as the county received, which is 32. But he, like others, said demand is starting to tick up.

"The economy is changing so I'm sure that list will get

longer," he said.

Douglas County in the early 2000s issued an average of 500 building permits a year countywide, said Moss. That dropped dramatically during the recession, and was down to two or three allocation applications at the lake for the last few years. Last year, 40 permits were issued for the entire county, she said, and 48 have been given out this year, with another six weeks left in its fiscal year.

Moss said there are 57 people on the waiting list for lake allocations.

South Lake Tahoe, which received 13 allocations out of a possible 21, did not respond to a request for a comment. But at last week's City Council meeting, Nancy Kerry, city manager, said there was a waiting list of about 100 for the allocations.

"A couple of years ago you could not give them away," she said.

Demand won't be letting up if architects are a harbinger. Dan Munsterman, with the Munsterman Group LLC in Tahoe Vista, said work is definitely returning, mostly on higher-end, lakefront properties, but it is starting to trickle down, too.

"The jobs I'm getting are tear downs. I don't have one single job on a vacant lot," said Munsterman. "I'm busier than I've been in eight to 10 years."