

Opinion: All is not well at Lake Tahoe

By Laurel Ames

On the shore of Sand Harbor Beach two weeks ago, state and federal lawmakers joined former Vice President Al Gore to celebrate modest improvements in Lake Tahoe's clarity over the last two years and to laud the "cooperation" between California and Nevada toward ensuring the lake's future.

Lost amid the pomp and circumstance of the 17th annual Lake Tahoe Summit, however, is the fact that due to recent actions by the very politicians who praised one another in Incline Village, Tahoe's future is now murky at best.

The lake that was once the bluest in America now faces the very real prospect of becoming increasingly clouded by pollutants, fast spreading algae and aggressive water plants, with its spectacular mountain ridgelines and shoreline obstructed by new tall buildings, increased traffic and congestion around the lake.

That is because last December, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency approved an innocent-sounding "Regional Plan Update" that upended more than three decades of carefully restrained growth rates and strong environmental protections. The old approach will be replaced with this radical increase in crowded areas and an equally radical reduction of protection measures.

Under the new plan, the planning agency all but abandons its primary mission: protecting Lake Tahoe. At the same time, the plan allows TRPA to cede its authority for planning and permitting to the same local governments that failed to protect Tahoe in the past.

The Coalition to Protect Lake Tahoe is speaking out to expose the fact that the plan allows more polluted runoff, traffic, smog, pavement and taller buildings – removing the firewall of environmental protection that the standards were intended to provide.

Sierra Club and Friends of the West Shore, represented by lawyers from Earthjustice, are legally challenging the new plan and opposing California Senate Bill 630, which would formalize TRPA's new approach of placing economic desires on an equal footing with environmental protection, because we are determined to protect Lake Tahoe.

While the *Sacramento Bee's* editorial "Regional pact, however imperfect, is best chance to keep Tahoe blue" (Aug. 25) acknowledged that the plan is "imperfect," the *Bee* hinges its hopes for the lake's future on implementation of the plan and more federal funding.

Yet even the best designed "implementation" and more federal funding can't solve fundamental flaws such as the lack of proper monitoring and enforcement.

While the editorial rightly acknowledges the need to reverse deterioration of Lake Tahoe, there is no margin for error when it comes to absorbing any new increase in pollutants. The Regional Plan update is pushing the lake to its tipping point – the moment when pollutants overwhelm the ability of the lake to be restored.

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