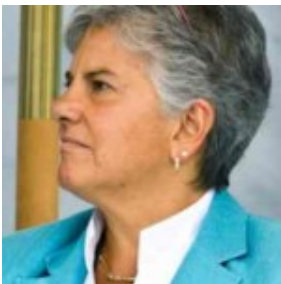


Opinion: Tahoe inspires planning professionals

By Joanne Marchetta

As planning professionals from 13 states converge on Lake Tahoe this week for the annual Western States American Planning Association Conference, Tahoe's record of environmental protection and land use planning are taking the regional stage. A few of the attendees on Monday shared with me their excitement over having the conference in Lake Tahoe this year. Besides the spectacular fall weather and incredible surroundings, Tahoe is full of hidden interest about what makes this a special and challenging place for what planners call "place-making".

Professional and citizen planners from around the nation and the globe look to our mountain home as a leader in environmental management and trendsetting policies, and Tahoe offers lessons to those who want to carry away its wisdom. The Lake Tahoe Regional Plan, Transportation Plan, and Environmental Improvement Program are headliner topics this week for the three-day conference in which attendees study innovations in the topics of growth, redevelopment, and environmental improvement.



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So, what makes Tahoe the place that it is? The 11th deepest

lake on the planet? The second largest at this elevation? The 39 trillion gallons of water it holds? Yes, but Tahoe was also one of the first places in the nation that started looking at planning at a regional, landscape scale. There are over 200 multi-state compact agencies nationwide, but TRPA is unique by being the only regional agency with the authority to implement land use and environmental regulations. We also started earlier here, more than 40 years ago, to protect the lake first against nutrient pollution, banning septic systems and requiring that all treated sewage be exported outside the watershed. We've continued that epic charge with water quality best management practices, pollutant reduction targets, and stream restoration among other measures.

Our small, permanent population of 55,000 contrasts with a huge influx of between 3 million and 5 million visitors each year. On Tahoe's mostly small, two-lane roadway system, we have to manage spikes of 300,000 people or more on peak holiday weekends. Of particular interest to planners coming from other areas is the fact that we have one of the strongest growth control systems in the nation that prohibits new subdivisions and stopped new development on sensitive lands. These are the characteristics that generate so much interest from planners around the nation who are facing the dual challenges of dwindling natural resources and population growth.

The award-winning updates to the Lake Tahoe Regional Plan are taking center stage in many of the conference's 30 workshop sessions. The new Regional Plan for Tahoe embodies a growing trend in planning: to collaborate more broadly across sectors and across jurisdictions and move more toward regional-scale work. Many new alliances and partnerships are being spawned across the country recognizing the need to scale up planning to this landscape, ecosystem level in order to become more effective at addressing emerging land use, transportation, and conservation problems.

TRPA recognizes that regulation alone is not enough to restore Lake Tahoe and the restoration effort called the Environmental Improvement Program is an equally important part of the conference events. The EIP is one of the most comprehensive, large-scale investments in environmental restoration in the nation, on the scale of the conservation work at other great water bodies like Chesapeake Bay, Everglades, Puget Sound, and Great Lakes.

The conference this week highlights the role that Lake Tahoe has on the national and international stage of environmental conservation and development planning, but what we can all be proud of is the positive results that are beginning to show from our combined efforts. The loss of lake clarity has flattened and more than 60 percent of TRPA's environmental standards are in attainment or improving. Tahoe's land and water is special to us, but the knowledge and experience we have to offer others may be more meaningful than we imagine.

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