

Opinion: S. Tahoe has obligation to manage parking

By Garry Bowen

As the 15-year debate about paid parking hopefully nears an end, as yet another of the misguided subject matters that have occupied public discourse here for far too long, the presentation on the outcomes of its progress so far was illustrative, not so much as a final answer to the ongoing furor, but of thinking that might actually allow necessary change.

As we are a gambling town (with looming better success elsewhere) I'm reminded of the comment made by the legendary "Baghdad-by-the-Bay" San Francisco Chronicle columnist Herb Caen years ago, about "metered-parking" there: "They're betting your own 25 cents against your \$25 that you don't make it back in time." A rather provocative way of looking at it.

But in today's world, the idea that designated places to park need to be managed is more and more a given, especially as citizens expect maintained services with a reduced workforce. In case anyone needs a reminder, South Lake Tahoe has undoubtedly taken on more responsibility in the current beautification efforts that have resulted in the increased popularity of El Dorado Beach, now known as Lakeview Commons, but also with the roadside improvements of the Caltrans projects from Trout Creek to Ski Run and beyond.



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Managing the influx of traffic that goes along with that increased usage (what popularity means) without assuming the additional "charge" of properly maintaining it would quickly render the improvements as another blight subject to even more derision as to "why not?".

Given the current paid-parking structure among our corporate citizens (and, yes, including our own parking garage in that "row"), as most charge at least \$25/day (with in/out privileges), it may be useful to review previous parking scenarios, in times with way more traffic than today.

As but one example, where the former Embassy Suites now sits, Harrah's Tahoe had a 500-car valet parking operation (governed under its California corporation, Harrah's South Shore Corp.), as Police Chief Brian Uhler made his presentation Tuesday in terms of transactions (per metered area), I found it useful to think back on the business of the above mentioned parking "space", as someone saw fit to replace it with a 400-room hotel, each one of which can only be rented once/day. In short, about 20,000 transactions/week were done in Harrah's parking valet operation, given that there were about 12-15 attendants per day parking and retrieving, for free, with those unlimited in/out privileges.

"America's All-Year Playground" was made eminently available to any or all of those not wanting to spend all their time inside a casino, as is today's wish, simply by redeeming your car via a little plastic tag tendered with the elegant doorman, then brought, in most cases, within a minute or so.

As the traffic in town was easily enough to uphold such an operation as above, what did they do about moving around the town, exploring and visiting other places and people? It was not a concern, as that traffic was diffused among many other popular locations (restaurants, beaches that were accessible

to all, trailheads, etc.) evening out with the choices that people made as to where they wanted to go. Today, we have a more limited selection with ever-more focused access, such as the emergent popularity of Thursday night Live at Lakeview events, and the ever-popular use of the myriad barbecue pits, even more so as the result of the great new look at the Commons.

The shift in perspective and focus on South Shore issues that folks have not had to think about before, understandably set their heels in the way it was, thinking that they are somehow being put-upon in the inevitable shift, curious when some of those same people have joined in the call for the obvious need for change. But they have not fully understood the difference between what it was and what it will need to be, especially when they don't acknowledge the vast shortage of a high-level of traffic, and the coming need to replace that with particular places of interest that have not existed before – and to facilitate doing it without the nightmare of choked-up demand, when the newly-realized supply comes into question.

There was one number in the chief's presentation that caught my eye, under the category "Residential Permit Zone": it went from zero in one year to 199 in the next, presumably reflecting the simultaneous introduction of Lakeview Commons popularity with the management of the newly-needed and introduced parking management scheme, as that might also presumably be the major source of soreness, given that that popularity has caused change along with any presumed heartburn.

In that case, it is probably not parking management that is the culprit, although I myself have issues with early overzealousness and need to refine training: it is the interruption of the cozy relationship associated with the laid-back days when not as many wanted to enjoy a particular facility.

No mention was made, for example, of the extraordinary bike valet service rotated among various volunteer groups in the city; had several hundred people not chosen to ride their bikes to the large and fully-occupied events, I believe the same Al Tahoe people would be stepping up to demand better management of the neighborhoods due to the immense number of cars occupying areas in Al Tahoe way beyond a several-block peripheral, had everyone there brought a vehicle instead.

That would be the nature of the coming emphasis on walkable/bikeable communities: offering other choices that can be made, if offered, toward more balanced traffic flow for access by all.

It is those other offerings that constitute well-managed transportation, as in today's world those options are increasingly important, especially in places which are notoriously car-centric. As those other offerings are patronized more, a certain stability can also be offered – but absent the stick of some being OK with paying, as they're used to, then the carrot of maintaining newly-realized attractions will become a serious burden, but rather just part of doing business in offering better and attractive amenities.

When Bill Harrah entertained the big-boat hydroplane races in his short-lived operation of Zephyr Cove, this writer was charged partially with organizing the traffic-flow and parking for that event – as then, and to too much of a degree even now, everyone wanted to bring their car along, particularly since there were more in the audience than transit could bear.

Déjà vu?

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