

Opinion: Communication would help solve Tahoe's problems

By Natasha Eulberg

As a native Californian with fond memories of happy summers spent in close proximity to Lake Tahoe, the idea that environmental regulations protecting the region I hold so dear are in danger of falling through is troubling. And yet that situation is very much a potential outcome of the court case regarding the regional management plan update for the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact.

Sierra Club and Friends of the West Shore vs. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency threatens to lead the Tahoe region into dangerous territory regarding perceptions of environment and land management. The case largely pits concerns over the legitimacy of environmental carrying capacity thresholds against opportunities for (re)development, community revitalization, and long-term environmental benefits. The Sierra Club and Friends of the West Shore (FOWS) officially filed the suit against the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency in February in response to TRPA's approval of an update of the 1987 management plan for the region. While the concerns of the plaintiffs regarding TRPA's decision to turn over responsibility for establishing and maintaining environmental standards to local governments and the worries of TRPA and development interest groups over the stagnation and dating of environmental regulations are both legitimate anxieties, these claims mask a larger problem that the case presents for the Tahoe region:

If regional maintenance of environmental regulation is forfeited now, we lose our best hope for a cohesive, holistic, and – most importantly – successful management strategy for Lake Tahoe in the future.

If responsibility for environmental protections is left in the hands of local governments and interest groups, "environment" will inevitably be compared to (and potentially lose out against) "development" and "economy." What we need, rather than this contrast, is a forum where the goals, concerns, and potential benefits of both environmental and developmental interest groups can be discussed, analyzed, and ultimately integrated into a management plan that neither attempts to banish human presence from the Tahoe basin, nor abandons the local environment to human exploitation.

I feel that this lawsuit represents a golden opportunity to create just such a forum. Rather than delaying implementation of the possible benefits that the proposed 2012 Regional Plan update has to offer by sluggishly trudging through the legal gauntlet, discussion could mold those benefits into a new plan that simultaneously addresses the concerns of environmentalists and community members, creating a vision for a Tahoe that everyone has a stake in.

Litigation isn't the answer to this problem; it's a divisive strategy that determines a winner.

Communication, on the other hand, seems as though it has a lot of potential.

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