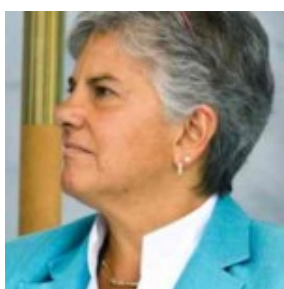


Opinion: Tahoe's environment depends on fewer cars

By Joanne Marchetta

In a year chock-full of positive milestones for the Lake Tahoe Basin, one accomplishment that stands out is the community's collective drive to create a walkable, bikeable Lake Tahoe. Even while a cold blanket of snow covers miles of Lake Tahoe's bike trails and paths, significant preparations continue for expanding the bike and pedestrian network throughout the region.

With about 130 miles of the network already built, there have been major improvements to mobility. But with a need for more than 250 miles of facilities to complete the network, seeing it through will take a commitment to change, a willingness to invest resources, and belief in the substantial, across-the-board benefits that will come from it.



Joanne
Marchetta

The terms walkability and bikeability have become part of the vernacular for environmental restoration here at Tahoe because of the clear connection between our reliance on the private automobile and the health of Lake Tahoe's air and water. More than 50 percent of the nitrogen entering Lake Tahoe every day is coming from local sources of emissions. However, many communities are finding out that these investments more than

pay for themselves economically as well as in the health and well-being of their citizens.

Tahoe has its own environmental and economic arguments to make for increased walking and biking, but nationally and globally, the facts and new research are compelling. Communities like Portland that have been investing in walkability and better urban design for decades have experienced measurable economic benefits. In the 1970s, Portland established an urban growth boundary much like Tahoe did, but it also began building “skinny” streets and over 30 years invested \$60 million on bike facilities – an amount that could easily be swallowed by just one freeway improvement project.

In an age when communities are competing to attract entrepreneurs and an intelligent work force, young, college educated people are moving to Portland at a rate five times higher than the national average. Attracting this segment of the population is needed here in Tahoe because Census data over the last 30 years shows a 13 percent decrease in people ages 20-45. In tourism-dependent Lake Tahoe, bicycling can also play a much larger role in our economy. The Lake Tahoe Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan estimates that bike recreation already brings between \$6 million and \$23 million per year in local direct expenditures.

According to Jeff Speck, city planner and author of “Walkable City”, new research is discovering more linkages between walkability and human health than were known before. A study of San Diego neighborhoods found that the likelihood of obesity decreased 25 percent in more walkable neighborhoods. It’s also no secret that air pollution is unhealthy, but across America today, the rate of vehicle travel is being used as a predictor of the population of people with asthma and asthmatic deaths have increased three times since the 1990s. Most of that increase is coming from car exhaust.

Here in Tahoe, since much of our infrastructure and town

centers were originally designed around the private automobile, a total transformation won't happen overnight, but it is year-by-year one mile of trail at a time. Updating the design of transportation in our communities takes more than one organization or agency can deliver, it takes commitment and vision and, as always, there is a place for you to jump in and take part.

A partnership of three local governments on the South Shore have joined forces and are meeting with citizens to design a multi-jurisdiction recreation and trails master plan. Public workshops were in December and a draft of the plan and capital investment strategy are scheduled to be released next year. No matter where you live, bike and pedestrian facilities are being designed and planned. Find out about them, weigh in on them and show your support.

Early next year, the TRPA transportation team will open applications for the On Our Way Community Grant Program. We will begin inviting community members, organized groups, and local governments to use the grants to develop and evaluate localized concepts like streetscape improvements, pedestrian promenades, and simple safety upgrades for pedestrians and bicyclists. The program will be funded through the Tahoe Metropolitan Planning Organization, a special designation which TRPA received from Congress more than a decade ago. Find out more online.

Making Tahoe more walkable and bikeable is a cornerstone of the updated Regional Plan. TRPA remains committed to working collaboratively with you and other organizations to make this vision a reality.

Joanne Marchetta is the executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.