

# Opinion: We can solve Tahoe's clarity problems

By Jeff Cowen

I have had the pleasure of serving as a spokesperson and community liaison for the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency for eight years and I have witnessed a lot of change at the agency and in our communities.

As I leave TRPA to join my wife in running our family business in South Lake Tahoe, I wanted to share with you some of the simple truths I have gleaned from hundreds of public meetings and many conversations with each of you.



Jeff Cowen

**First, Lake Tahoe has a water quality problem.** It seems obvious, but many of the conversations I have witnessed over the years seem to lose this fact. We all want something from Lake Tahoe, but we need to give back in order to keep things in balance.

**Next, cooperation reduces regulation.** Problems don't go away just because we can't agree on how to address them. So why not be involved and work together on the solutions?

**Now, on to my farewell tips to the community:**

**Get defensive and do your BMPs.** After the Angora wildfire burned 254 homes to the ground, defensible space was on

everyone's mind. Soon after, enthusiasm waned. Now we seem to have forgotten that thinning trees and replacing wood roofs are critical to making our neighborhoods safer and protecting Lake Tahoe. May is Wildfire Awareness Month in the Tahoe basin and all local fire protection agencies are asking that we again take up the banner of wildfire threat reduction. It is not a question of if, but when a wildfire is going to visit us again.

**Get a site assessment on your property.** Eventually, everyone needs to know how much land coverage they have and how much they are allowed to have. In the Tahoe basin, this information is just as big a factor to a property's value as the number of bathrooms. A coverage assessment is also the first step to taking advantage of new land coverage exemptions under the Regional Plan Update. Your property may already have this information on file, but if it doesn't, don't let the filing fee deter you. Knowledge is invaluable.

**Get out of here once in a while.** Tahoe's awesomeness is better understood with fresh perspective. Just as many learn from TRPA how to successfully balance the human and natural environments, we benefit from the input of others.

**Stick to the plan.** Every year, a little bit more of the Regional Plan gets updated and it is working. Restoring an entire watershed with tens of thousands of private homes tucked into nearly every corner will take generations to complete. Even though I am one of TRPA's biggest cheerleaders, I am also a small business owner and a homeowner who understands the regulatory process from both sides. I can say with some authority that the Regional Plan that so many of you supported is worth taking the time to implement.

If we stick to the plan, we can ensure that this is the generation that solves Lake Tahoe's water quality woes. The next generation may have issues of its own to grapple with, but at least their lives will still revolve around a clean and

pure Lake Tahoe.

**Debate, but be willing to compromise.** Lake Tahoe doesn't care if you are rich or poor, left or right, paddleboarder or wakeboarder. The actions of every one of us matter equally in this fragile watershed, so in order to save it we need to move beyond our differences and focus on what we share. There will always be voices that try to sway with hardline opinions and fear of the unknown. As I have watched decisions get made over the years, I have learned that solutions do not reside in extreme positions.

Finally, I am grateful to everyone who has ever asked me a question, offered input, or blown off steam to me about TRPA over the years. I and everyone at TRPA love to serve others and we owe it to you to continually listen, learn, and improve. Yours in service, Jeff Cowen.

*Jeff Cowen will be with TRPA through the end of June.*