

Opinion: Tahoe – a continual work in progress



Lake Tahoe's natural beauty is not reflected in the South Shore ad campaign. Photo/Kathryn Reed

By Kathryn Reed

Park City is being held up as the latest poster child of tourism for the South Shore to emulate.

The theme of the ninth annual South Shore Tourism Forum was economic and community revitalization. Instead of a to-do list for the South Shore it was more of a tutorial on what the Utah resort community has done.

Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority and North Lake Tahoe Resort Association employees and members traveled to Park City in April 2014 to learn what that ski town has done to be successful. Ever since then there has been a litany of dog-and-pony shows to tout how great Park City is.

Tuesday afternoon was another chance for about 150 people to hear the same story that has been repeated multiple times since the excursion. Only this time it was two Park City officials who did much of the talking. This was after a lengthy video was shown of their town when the Tahoe brigade was there.

Ken Fisher, recreation manager, and Jonathan Weidenhamer, economic development manager, were the Park City officials who came west for the two-hour event at Lake Tahoe Resort Hotel on April 21.

Park City is an old mining town that in the 1950s was practically a ghost town with boarded up businesses on Main Street. Now it embraces that history which is evident by walking through the downtown.

One of the more revealing comments from the duo was prompted by a question from Ty Polastri with Lake Tahoe Bicycle Coalition. He asked what authentic elements they saw on the South Shore.

An awkward pause and chuckle ensued.



Heavenly Village has been full of people all winter even without snow. Photo/LTN file

“I think the authentic experience is the vibrancy, the

people,” Fisher said. “I love that you have a campground on the main street. And obviously the lake.”

But he admitted he would not publicly say what he would rather see the campground land used for.

They were both most impressed with how Heavenly Mountain Resort’s gondola starts from the center of Heavenly Village. What they’d like to see is the energy of the village carried all the way to the lake.

The problem, they didn’t have to point out, is that it’s like walking or driving through a ghetto near the state line going from Highway 50 to the lake.

They smirked at the names of some of the hotels that reflect a bygone era, and scooted by how some of those lodging establishments look.

Then they commented on how their recreation center is a true community gathering place. That isn’t true of South Lake Tahoe’s or even Kahle in Stateline. They did have good things to say about the operators of the city owned ice rink.

It was the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics that spurred revitalization. (Winter is Park City’s main season, unlike Lake Tahoe where summer dominates.)

But what was lacking in the presentation was how Tahoe – any of the shores – could capture a bigger piece of the winter market.

Leading up to those 2002 Games and afterward Park City taxpayers approved a slew of bonds that primarily fund recreation and arts. There are restaurant taxes, higher property taxes for second homeowners, and additional sales tax beyond what the state mandates.



Taxes for the “right” reason will get voter approval. Photo/LTN file

Todd Poth with Getaway Reno-Tahoe said how the South Shore isn't about to tax itself to have what Park City has. It has a ton of public art, free public transit and embraces its mining history. It has a performing arts center and other venues for people to gather.

But the reality is people on the South Shore will tax themselves. Just look at the \$55 million Lake Tahoe Community College bond that was passed last fall and the \$64.5 million Lake Tahoe Unified School District bond voters approved a few years ago. Those are for facilities. Voters approved Measure S for recreation. South Lake Tahoe voters approved an increase in hotel and sales taxes.

This community has demonstrated it will pay for what it believes in.

Douglas County Board of Commissioners this month gave direction to staff to come back in June with ordinances that would raise nearly \$4 million a year. This money would be used on the South Shore Vision and in the valley. The dollars could be leveraged to obtain grants so the total pot of money to invest in the county is even greater.

A 2.5 percent utility operator fee (natural gas, electricity,

landlines, and a portion of cell phones), 0.05 percent fuel tax and 0.25 sales tax are likely to be approved this summer. State law allows the county to implement all of these taxes by ordinance without going to the voters.



Douglas County is moving forward with the South Shore Vision. Rendering/Design Workshop

“Figure out your vision. What’s the prize? I think you can build a better place if you figure out what it is,” Weidenhamer said. “Doing nothing is a terrible choice.”

He admitted it will be hard and that some people will be mad, but that is a side effect of progress and change.

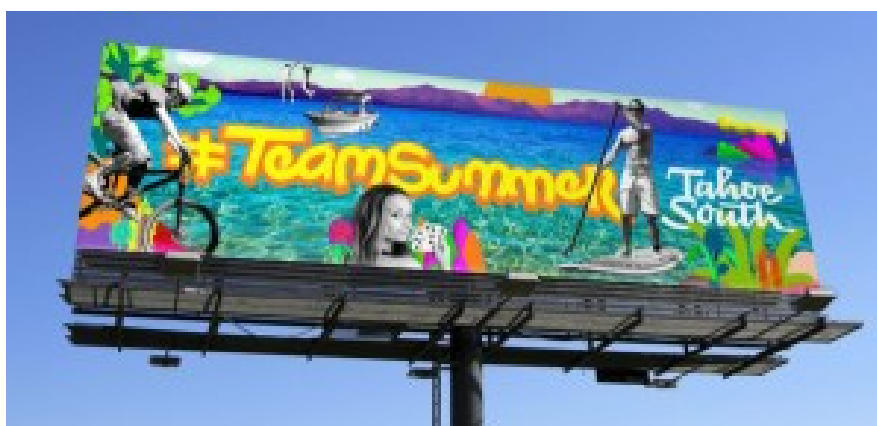
The problem is that the South Shore has not figured out what it wants to be. Instead of looking inward for self-reflection, for authenticity to grow upon the reasons we all moved here or stay here, the community looks elsewhere for answers.

Plenty of consultants have come through with ideas. Pretty drawings have been composed of what the area could be. The same “leaders” trot out the same ideas and yet nothing changes. At some point one has to question whether it’s

ineffective leadership that is stalling progress, or perhaps the wrong ideas are being presented, or perhaps the will of the people is being ignored. Or maybe it's the rules that are in place – like being the only place in the country that has tourist accommodation units and commercial floor area as commodities – that are hindering forward movement.

It's pretty evident by anyone who travels elsewhere that the South Shore is tired looking and that there is no “there there” – as in no soul, no wow factor (other than the lake), no defining event or visual that says Tahoe. There is the lake, but it's been pointed out for years that the body of water has not been marketed as well as it should have been or could be. Access points are not well marked. Think about visiting Tahoe for the first time. Would you know how to get to the beach? Lakeview Commons in South Lake Tahoe and Tahoe Commons in Tahoe City are the only obvious places. A vast swath of the shoreline is visible on the West Shore but it's rocky and every “private” sign on all the docks is not welcoming.

We have this incredible jewel, but it's like a museum piece that is locked behind a gated wall. Bringing the lake to the forefront may be our answer.



This is the 2014 ad campaign which is similar to 2015's. Photo/Duncan-Channon

Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority is trying to do just that with

its summer 2015 ad campaign even though it is continuing to keep with the comic book-like characters instead of the true natural environmental that is so stunning. And, of course, gaming is still part of the mix. And it should be. But maybe it's time for the marketers to emphasize the natural beauty of the lake – not a caricature of it – (have you seen the ads for Colorado and Montana?) – that also touts recreation, and then have separate gaming ads with a bit of that scenery. Because, really, no gaming destination is as beautiful as Lake Tahoe.

Or maybe the current ad campaign reflects the South Shore perfectly – colorful, a bit schizophrenic, without a true focus and a message the masses can't understand. LTVA's summer campaign message is "Summer rules your face".