

Regional trail advocates tout collaboration

By Kathryn Reed

RENO – Being on *Outside* magazine's top 10 list when it comes to trails. It's a goal trail advocates in the region are striving for.

More than 50 people – trail builders, land owners, nonprofits, government agencies, volunteers, contractors, sporting good store managers, users and others – attended an all-day summit last week at Bartley Ranch Regional Park to flush out how to be better at what they do. What they are doing is building trails and making a network that connects. This was the second annual Eastern Sierra/Tahoe Trails Summit.

"We want a regional trails plan from Markleeville to Plumas County. We want to have common trail standards," Cheryl Surface, with Washoe County Regional Parks and Open Space, said.

Learning from one another, networking and finding common ground were some of the goals that were accomplished.

It was acknowledged that while trails can be an economic driver in terms of bringing in tourists, increasing property values and cutting down on health care expenses, those controlling the purse strings and issuing the permits are not always buying into those things.

While trails may bring money, they cost big bucks to build and maintain. That is why partnerships were stressed.

Garrett Villanueva, trail planning expert with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, and Clay Grubb, trail builder with the Tahoe Rim Trail Association, talked about their unique

relationship.

“You need to establish relevancy with the agency,” Villanueva said. It’s not enough to identify a problem or have an idea. Have a solution or way to implement the idea is a must.

Grubb said, “If you can take on the maintenance, all of a sudden you are relevant.”

Every trail that gets built then must be maintained. That means someone’s budget has a new ongoing expense. The windstorms this last winter had crews contending with blow downs almost every place where trees grow. While volunteers can do some of the work, it is the landowner – usually a government agency – that at a minimum for legal reasons must oversee the work gets done.

More than one speaker talked of the need to find someone in the agency to be a champion for the cause. And once that person is identified, don’t go over their head, be appreciative and be patient. Government can work at glacial speed because there is a process.

Persistence is key, as is understanding the agency has constraints that may not be obvious.

So often a trail crosses land that has multiple owners who don’t all have the same interests, time schedule or rules that must be followed.

“We as an agency get all the responsibility, but none of the credit,” Villanueva said. The nonprofit trail group usually is touted as the one that made everything come together.

Villanueva pointed out the lack of trail etiquette in the Lake Tahoe and surrounding area, especially compared to Colorado and Utah.

“We need to start behaving better. It’s about sharing the trail. We are all out there for the same reasons,” he said.

Grubb said as a trail builder it's important to think of all the users and not just a group's special interest. This means paying attention to site lines and passing points.

Michael Ward, a consultant with the Eastern Sierra Recreation Collaborative, spoke about how his group won over the Forest Service after receiving a chilly reception. The Inyo National Forest was working on its Forest Plan and Ward's group only wanted to address recreation.

"Shared values" was the thrust of Ward's group. It brought people together. He said having people participate in activities to bring their beliefs to the forefront instead of just talking at them or having advocates write comments helped spur collaboration and build consensus.

Dan Morris with the Carson Ranger District of the USFS said the problem he has is the demand for trails outweighs the opportunities. What allowed his office to build 50 miles of trails in the last five years are partnerships with groups.

Funding is his biggest challenge. Today there is no money for new trails.

"We have to get creative," Morris said. This means the nonprofits are likely the ones to come up with the funding and the Forest Service provides the guidance.