

Opinion: Tahoe – a glass half-empty

By Garry Bowen

Back around May Day, I wrote an article “A Glass Half-Full”, as a commentary on South Lake Tahoe celebrating a 50th anniversary of its incorporation while at the same time having several workshops on the question of what SLT wants to be when it grows up, highlighted by looking at each of those workshops, from the original standpoint of until we know and find shared agreement as to who we are, we won't know why we're caring for a future for the next 50 years.

Let's take another look, under the promised title, “A Glass Half-Empty”. A bit darker of a full mirrored reflection, as Tahoe's proposed and purported successful future may depend on it.



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As an observation in that earlier May Day piece (not by accident was that simile used), some have sensed that these workshops “barely touched upon how to turn the ideas into reality”, so I've been pondering the actual directions seen since that time, given the coming and going of Memorial Day, several soft opening months trial run of the fulfillment of our fourth casino being back in operation, and the just-completed 4th of July.

In a "Glass Half-Full", included within was a cryptic comment: "examples of other strategic missteps lie in wait"; unfortunately, a "half-empty" approach turns out to be prescient for purposes of follow-through, as an in years past perspective was used in the first instance to share partially what a Tahoe experience was like then, as so many transitory lives do not have that perspective, nor apparently do they do now.

Today's perspective has not gotten any better, as the word "abysmal" has come into play several times.

But adjustments can be made to shift to higher quality, if the now-seen gap can be creatively fulfilled.

The following comments will refer to basically two errant directions, both related to Tahoe South's implied direction of Tahoe's viable and vital experiences for our visitor-based economy. The first would be the current revival of the idea that we are to become "America's All-year Playground", the slogan that accompanied the time-span of SLT's incorporation period in 1965, which ongoing earnest efforts of many young local staffs now suggest is going to happen – the new trail extensions, the new bicycle facilities, the continued mapping of our extensive trail network, even Vail's corporate entry into summer activities complementary to "iffy" winter prospects, are all suggestive of fulfillment of that professed desire.

Problem is, most of the current visitor-based emphasis is on hanging around the largest provided venue for them, Heavenly Village, as a majority never venture very far away, like outbound for other activities in the area, relying once again on mostly a day-tripper crowd, a lot of whom are never seen downtown at all, and vice-versa. Marriott has some 4,000 locations around the world, Tahoe being but one of those that might be chosen to visit, so I believe it is Tahoe's earlier known cachet that is the attraction, but it may not end up to

be too fruitful in building a newer clientele unless new marketing strategies are deployed to fill the gaps.

It would appear that most visitors there want to be associated with Tahoe, but are not really experiencing it in its fuller versions or glory, in spite of what outgoing surveys might indicate.

After all, it is all of us that are here that are to know the difference, and by all accounts we do not.

That would lead to item No. 2, the current situations associated with our casino corridor, still thought to be our "core" of economic activity, at the very least in their opinion – two of the most prominent, closest to the California-Nevada state line, with entrepreneurial pedigrees unique to Lake Tahoe, and the other two, with a more variegated background, in spite of their long-standing traditional family connection.

Noting that Nevada proper has a very slight improvement in gaming revenues throughout the state, Stateline's were nevertheless down over 6 percent, which suggests that either the addition of a fourth entity did nothing to stimulate an increase in market share to cover another third (33 percent) addition to the real estate, or that, in spite of a promotional "splash", any new clientele were not satisfied or impressed.

That latter comment is worthy of a fuller look, as interactions I have had suggest that unless the service accompanies the new digs, the outlook for much repeat business is not too good, as "satisfaction will not bring them back," as the 9-lives scenario hopes.

Combine that, for now, with the previous category idea of underutilized recreational facilities that local folks will most certainly enjoy, but which won't do much to increase the tax base or revenue streams, then the significance of a

marketing void becomes all the more apparent. The “need to grow up” includes knowing what steps to take that may overcome what “adolescent” tendencies need to be changed.

As my schedule is very flexible, yet includes a significant background here, I meet people from all over the world, as we all can and do, but I ask them of their experiences, from a perspective of knowing what questions to ask, which quite often require more than an “I’m fine” response to “How are you?”

The most recent one was a young professional woman from Tasmania, whose friends in Reno and she decided that after conducting her business in Colorado, then to Nevada, that they wanted something different, exciting, and fun, so they chose coming up from Reno to stay at our newest venture, which promised the adjectives above – but when she can report that they were sorry they did that – that from the valet parking, to the front desk, to the bellman, to the wait for the entrée, when they wanted to go have the fun promised, it became quickly apparent that it was not to be delivered.

That prompted from a young, sophisticated global traveler a conclusion that the experience was “abysmal”, a descriptive word used in the English-speaking world, but not in any way as PR spin.

Unfortunately for Tahoe in this seemingly isolated and particular case, this has been too often mirrored these days regardless of the specific location, which of course has nothing to do with the creation of the original Tahoe cachet still reflected in the four, five, and six-color brochures touting the exciting and beautiful happenings to be had here.

The honest and sincere attempts at identifying ourselves from the recent past will not be fully realized, nor will our planned success in redeveloping our economic infrastructure, if all these efforts are not combined with the realization

that our visitors are not just responsible for the jobs we have, but also serve as opportunities to improve our own attitudes about the experiences they expect and deserve while they're here, and that staff's management organize themselves in such a way to allow the staff to bring that experience to fruition.

Bottom-line issues simply cannot intrude into understaffing and undertraining – that only contributes to what is known in the human resource field as “survival-hiring” – having too many slots to fill with the closest warm-body, as the time is not devoted to training them adequately and appropriately for the tasks they were chosen to do. With that, the term “turnstile” comes to mind.

After all, the reminder is that “service” is the only product we have, as we have no factories to produce it, just our presence in their experience of visiting here.

Nothing contributes to a “buzz kill” quicker than to encounter someone not happy or content in their position – that resonates far beyond the actual time spent in the encounter, by either side – and now, the farthest reaches of the globe don't have a spokesperson for Lake Tahoe, including Mauritius, another resort community in the middle of the Indian Ocean ... the conversation previous to the one mentioned above, as the word used then was “dismal”, another word not often chosen by professionals.

Of course, we won't see those words in any brochure – while the experience itself gains steam all over.

Tahoe need not be part of a “picture-postcard mentality”, unless we want to end up thinking of ourselves as just another “pretty face”, as, trust me, there are plenty of them around the entire globe.

Until that realization hits home, the glass doesn't just remain half-full, but will stay half-empty.

Garry Bowen has more than a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health. He may be reached at tahoefutureforum@gmail.com.