

Truckee tackling climate change



The Truckee River is a trickle between Tahoe City and Truckee. Photo/LTN

By Linda Fine Conaboy

TRUCKEE – Whether to jump aboard the global warming freight train or to simply remain at the station as the issue continues to heat up was the question posed last week at a Truckee climate planning workshop.

Town Manager Tony Lashbrook explained that the mission, moving forward, is to scope out, process and budget a greenhouse gas inventory and how the town might pursue a climate action plan.

The meeting, though fairly well represented by interested and seemingly supportive stakeholders, among them Truckee Donner Public Utilities District, a parks and recreation manager, a representative from the Truckee River Watershed Council and several interested citizens, did not, according to Lashbrook, include all of those who could have been there.

“I’m happy with the way the meeting went, though,” Lashbrook said July 7. “The objective was a workshop to educate community members, the town council and others on climate

change. We wanted to point the compass to define the purpose and benefits of doing climate planning in California.”

To that end, Sierra Business Council and a group called the Local Government Commission, both nonprofit organizations, led the workshop they dubbed Climate Policy 101, starting with a presentation followed by public comment, and a question-and-answer session.

According to its website, SBC works closely with Sierra Nevada cities, providing training to staff and assisting them in preparing greenhouse gas emissions inventories, a first step in a jurisdiction’s climate protection initiative.

The carbon cycle, explained SBC President Steve Frisch, is a simple biochemical process where carbon is exchanged. It’s a series of processes by which carbon compounds are interconverted in the environment, chiefly involving the incorporation of carbon dioxide into living tissue by photosynthesis and its return to the atmosphere through respiration, the decay of dead organisms, and the burning of fossil fuels.

Carbon dioxide makes up 1 percent of the world’s atmosphere. Frisch said his agency’s goal is to figure out how to advance California’s policy, which demands that carbon be reduced to 1990 levels by 2020.

“When we burn fossil fuel, we return it to the atmosphere. The recent fire in Yosemite emitted as much carbon dioxide as all of the emissions recorded in Southern California in a year,” Frisch said.

Reducing these emissions is Frisch’s passion. What’s happening, he said, is that across the board, state policy is driving reduction, and California is meeting its goals.

Cap and trade plays a role. However, according to Frisch, who presented an extremely simplified definition, those who reduce

their greenhouse emissions can sell them and those who don't, can buy them, with all money from this project funneled into greenhouse emission reduction.

The Environmental Protection Agency, on its website, explained that successful cap and trade programs reward innovation, efficiency and early action and provide strict environmental accountability without inhibiting economic growth.

According to Frisch, this is important because the revenue side of the equation is driving a bunch of state programs – by 2020 the fund will total \$5 billion, portions of which can be accessed by local entities meeting their pre-established goals.

Lashbrook said because of its location Truckee is not required to do climate planning. However, there are definitely big incentives and benefits to developing such a plan, not to mention the residual good to be gained from efforts to reduce global warming.

Greg Jones, vice president of SBC, cited a litany of positive reasons to embark on these kinds of programs: cleaner air leading to a reduction of asthma and obesity; reduction in the probability of catastrophic wildfires, green building benefits, wiser water usage, advances in land use and big pluses on the business side of things.

While the reasons to actively seek to reduce our carbon footprints are compelling, the looming question is, how to do this?

Kate Meis, executive director of Local Government Commission, led that charge. By way of explanation, LGC is a nonprofit, fostering innovation in environmental sustainability, economic prosperity and social equity.

Since the majority of carbon emissions come from private vehicles, Meis discussed the need to make alternatives to

driving cars more attractive and then how to optimize that driving. She also talked about the need for in-fill projects, more efficient vehicles, mixed-use neighborhoods, flood protection projects, green infrastructure, "cool" roofs and water recycling.

And when funds finally do become available, it's important to be pro-active in how to spend the money. Meis discussed municipal leadership, regulations and community engagement. And most important to advocates is how to actively engage the public in these programs, should they finally come to fruition.

Meis said Truckee has done a good job in meeting the goals it now has in place, such as its low-impact development standards and green building policies. But the belief more needs to be done and this is the charge of Truckee's community leaders. Now they must discern if the area's citizens have the fire in their bellies to climb on board this quickly moving freight, and then they must determine how to get it done.

Meis said it's important to have goals, even little ones that are easily measured and then to demonstrate a method as to how to get there. "There needs to be a broad and deep collaborative process among departments and the public to develop a plan for combatting climate change."