

Recreationists lack transit options in Tahoe

By Jessie Marchesseau

This summer the Tahoe Rim Trail Association led the Connecting Tahoe Rim Trail Users to Transportation Alternatives project to study who was using the trail, what mode of transportation they used to get there, whether or not they were using two vehicles as shuttles (which equals even more miles driven) and whether or not they would use transit if it were available.

Results showed 86 percent of hikers arrived by car, 34 percent drove two vehicles in order to self-shuttle, and 59 percent indicated they would consider using transit if it were available. The project went on to examine what transit is currently available, what other communities are doing with similar situations, the alternatives going forward and finally made recommendations as to future transit policies and projects.

Mary Bennington, TRTA executive director, was pleased to announce that since they completed the study, transit stops have already been established in both directions at the Spooner Summit trailheads. The TRTA is also working on creating a TRT app that would help hikers plan and arrange trail access.

Public transit, specifically as it relates to people getting to trailheads, was the subject of the Oct. 21 Tahoe Talks Brown Bag Lunch Series put on by the Tahoe Metropolitan Planning Organization at Lake Tahoe Community College.

The series is designed as a lunchtime forum for residents to learn about and discuss topics affecting the community such as transportation, the environment and economic issues.



George Fink, Anjanette Hoefer, and Mary Bennington talk Oct. 21 about transit in Lake Tahoe for those accessing trails.
Photo/Jessie Marchesseau

This month's Tahoe Talk was the first in a two-part series to be continued Nov. 18. The speaker panel consisted of Bennington; George Fink, transit system program manager for Tahoe Transportation District; and Anjanette Hoefer, supervisory civil engineer with the U.S. Forest Service. David Reichel, wilderness education coordinator for LTCC, acted as the moderator.

Bennington echoed what the other two panelists had said before her: there is a lot of opportunity here for public and private shuttle services.

Fink focused his short presentation on the importance of public transit and the need for it here in Lake Tahoe, in addition to the need for some changes to our existing system, such as a way for buses to transport more bicycles since an increasing number of riders are bringing their bikes along. (TTD is considering purchasing bike trailers to pull behind the smaller buses). He also discussed issues with transportation funding. Getting dollars for transit is difficult in general, but there are a number of circumstances at work in Tahoe which make it even harder.

Government money for transit is unpredictable, at best, and unquestionably inadequate. There are federal, state and local taxes allocated to transit uses, but they don't add up to enough to make significant improvements to systems nationwide, and definitely not here in Tahoe.

Tahoe is unique in its transit needs for a number of reasons: first of all, the basin is located in two states, five counties and one city. No individual jurisdiction wants to pay for the transit services in other counties, and California doesn't want to pay for transit in Nevada and vice versa. This makes funding public transportation from one side of the lake to the other complicated as it crosses so many boundary lines.

Another issue unique to Lake Tahoe is the huge lake right in the middle of the community. There is no central area or hub where everything disperses from like there is in Mammoth, Park City or Breckenridge. Recreation opportunities are located all along the highway that encircles the lake. As a result, adequate transportation to trailheads and recreation areas requires covering a lot more miles.

And finally, there is the issue of only about 50,000 people living in the Lake Tahoe Basin and somewhere in the neighborhood of 400,000 using the facilities. Tourism drives the local economy, but most tourists are not residents. Therefore a lot of the people using the roads and transportation services are not paying into county funds used to finance them.

But, Hoefer pointed out, not all transportation has to be provided by government services. Offering shuttles to and from popular trailheads could be a commercial opportunity for local businesses. She said the Forest Service is looking into creating some sort of permitting system for such services between its trailheads.

"With the public transportation, as you can see, there's

limited funding,” Hoefer said. “We can’t get people from everyplace within the basin to the trailheads they want to be. And there’s an opportunity for commercial providers to provide that, and we want to help work on ‘what does that look like, and how do we do it?’”

The floor was also opened to the 30 or so people in attendance to ask questions and share ideas. Some of the other suggestions/topics touched on included a shuttle to Echo Summit and/or Echo Lake, a Fallen Leaf Lake shuttle, a scenic bus or trolley tour encouraging tourists to ride rather than drive all the way around the lake, a ferry system, how to inform tourists of public transit opportunities, what to do about parking lots for people riding these shuttles, how to get more bikes on buses, and possible ways to get money for implementing any of these ideas.

There is also another side of the issue to consider: would public transit and easy access to trailheads cause overuse of certain areas and trails, ultimately damaging the forests and environment in the long run? It’s a question which can only be answered when and if any of this actually comes to fruition.

Part 2 of the Tahoe Talks Brown Bag Lunch Series on Transit: What’s in Store for Transit North and South? will be Nov. 18, noon-1:30pm in the Aspen Room at LTCC.