

Integrated transit in Tahoe far from reality



Tahoe City's transit center is an integral component of the North Shore bus system.
Photo/Provided

By Kathryn Reed

Free, integrated regional transit in the Lake Tahoe Basin is the ultimate goal of those who are in the business of getting people out of their vehicles and those who are involved with tourism.

Money is the hurdle that still needs to be cleared in order for that dream to become a reality.

That was the message from a panel of four who spoke Nov. 18 during the monthly Tahoe Talks Brown Bag Lunch Series at Lake Tahoe Community College. George Fink with Tahoe Transportation District, Sandy Evans-Hall of North Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, Tom Fortune from Heavenly Mountain Resort and Jaime Wright with the Truckee-North Tahoe Transit Management Association touched on a range of transit issues during the discussion.

Heavenly provides free transit for skiers and employees when they are working. The bus is also free to anyone who gets on those particular buses.

Fortune said a future goal is to use the 1,200 spaces at California Lodge in the summer as a park and ride, with buses then going to Heavenly Village where guests would take the gondola up to the resort's rope courses and other amenities.

The North Shore and Truckee are combining their resources. TART now stands for Truckee Tahoe Area Regional Transit. Buses are painted the same for the most part, with the Truckee ones having a little more green to embrace the town's green initiative and Tahoe buses having blue to recognize keeping the lake blue. One phone number will be used.

This all eliminates confusion for riders who don't understand the geographic boundaries of towns and states.

Panelists reiterated the need for a seamless system.

Joanne Marchetta, executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, said that will be hard to do with one city, five counties and two states. It was pointed out how ski resorts can't even figure out how to cooperate to get riders to the various resorts using shared transit.

Evans-Hall said it is time to look at transit as an amenity. She said that is what other resort destinations are doing – and it's paying off. People are parking once and not getting in their vehicles until their vacation is over.

South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Austin Sass, who is also on the TTD board, said, "We are a parking deficient town. The long-term solution to get people out of their cars is to have parking."

To pay for free transit in places like Park City, Vail and Steamboat a variety of taxes have been put in place. They range from hotel to recreation to lift ticket to sales taxes.

Placer County is looking at raising its transient occupancy and sales taxes.

When TOT is raised it can be done so with 50 percent plus one voter passing it. If the funds were to be earmarked for something specific, like transit, it then requires a two-thirds majority. How some jurisdictions are getting around this is to put the TOT to a vote and having a secondary question asking voters to prioritize where the money goes.

North Shore did a study that says it would cost \$7.2 million to run a free transit system with buses stopping every 30 minutes. The bus system today has a budget of \$4.5 million. The consultants said it is likely the difference would be made up in the first year based on the increase of people coming to the area and spending money.

Evans-Hall and her people are moving in that direction, with the goal of having free bus service in five years.

The South Shore isn't anywhere close to doing the same.

Fink said the goals on this end of the lake with BlueGo are to have buses go to Meyers and into neighborhoods.