

Opinion: Housing is a communitywide issue

By Joanne Marchetta

Like many communities that are highly-desirable places to vacation and live, Lake Tahoe has affordable housing problems. Two recent studies commissioned by the Tahoe Prosperity Center and Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation clearly illustrate the housing challenges our region faces.

Median home prices of more than \$500,000 on the North Shore and nearly \$400,000 on the South Shore are simply too high for our region's low wages, putting the cost of home ownership and even rent out of reach for many working people.



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Lake Tahoe has been a world-renowned recreation destination for decades, a short day drive from major metropolitan areas like Sacramento, the Bay Area, and Reno, all of which are growing and have affordable housing challenges. This proximity to areas with much more diverse economies and much higher wages is reflected in our housing stock, as more than half of the houses in the Tahoe basin are vacation homes. Many are used only occasionally by their owners and sit empty the rest of the year. Others are rented out as short-term lodging for vacationers.

Full-time rentals are scarce and often unaffordable for many people who live and work at Lake Tahoe, and for other people who must commute into and out of the Tahoe basin each day because they cannot find affordable housing or adequate employment here. Hundreds of deed-restricted affordable housing units have been built at Lake Tahoe, but they are at full occupancy, with waiting lists of one to two years for new tenants.

Affordable workforce housing is a complex, challenging issue here at Lake Tahoe and elsewhere. We are not alone in facing these issues and there's a renewed spirit today in Tahoe to tackle the challenge.

California is wrestling with this difficult topic as we speak. At a summit in Los Angeles this month, local governments, housing advocates, and state leaders met for a broad forum on California's housing woes. In many areas, housing has not kept pace with population and job growth. A shortage of affordable workforce housing now threatens to hamper the state's economic recovery. It is also creating environmental and transportation problems as people commute long distances to and from work.

A shortage of workforce housing options is having similar impacts here at Lake Tahoe. Thousands of people commute into and out of the Tahoe basin each day because they work here but can't afford to live here, or because they live here but can't find adequate employment at Tahoe. Companies and agencies struggle to recruit and retain workers because of high housing costs. Many of our full-time residents are struggling financially to stay in their communities, with housing prices and rents continuing to climb even as wages remain low and stagnant.

These housing challenges are not unique to Lake Tahoe, or even to California, which had a median home price of \$514,000 in September, according to the California Association of Realtors. Many mountain communities in the American West

depend on tourism as their main economic driver and have comparatively low service sector wages like Lake Tahoe. Many also have high land and utility costs, high construction costs, and limited areas available for any new housing development to occur, all of which make building affordable workforce housing a challenge.

Lake Tahoe has some unique challenges in providing affordable housing. Some point to our development rights system and the allocations needed for housing, commercial, and tourist lodging projects as one obvious barrier. These systems were put in place decades ago to protect Lake Tahoe's unique natural environment from overdevelopment. TRPA is leading an initiative to fully examine and improve the development rights system, not only for housing, but to help spur the type of redevelopment projects we now need to restore our environment, revitalize our economy, strengthen our communities, and improve the overall quality of life here for everyone.

The 2012 Regional Plan took clear steps to allow the coverage and density needed for new housing and mixed-use redevelopment projects in our town centers. Affordable multi-family housing projects do not require any development allocations, and there are hundreds of housing bonus units available for these types of projects. These incentives are used only sparingly, indicating that while we do need to improve Lake Tahoe's unique development rights system, there are clearly also other issues involved in solving our workforce housing challenges, including the need for economic revitalization to increase wages and career opportunities for working families.

We at TRPA are encouraged to see a growing conversation about affordable workforce housing at Lake Tahoe, and to see people pushing for continued dialogue and solutions. The Tahoe Truckee Community Foundation is working to form a regional housing authority to help address workforce housing issues on the North Shore. We hope to see that initiative succeed and be mirrored on the South Shore. Challenges and solutions will

likely differ around the lake.

TRPA stands ready to help solve Lake Tahoe's affordable workforce housing challenges, and to partner with local governments, nonprofit groups, and residents to find creative solutions. There is no one silver bullet to solve these complex issues, and no one agency or group that can fix them all on its own. But by strengthening our collective will to work together on this important issue and be creative, we can make needed change happen.

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