

Tahoe-Truckee expand economy beyond tourism

By Kathryn Reed

There is a movement under way in the Tahoe-Truckee area to build an economy independent of snow and gaming.

Benefits include higher wages in non-tourism industries and year-round jobs.

Two obstacles are the shallow talent pool and regulations. The lack of qualified workers can be solved by importing people from the Bay Area or elsewhere. Regulations – like the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency’s coverage and commodities rules – will take longer to change.

“This is an affordable place relative to a lot of other tech places,” Chris McNamara, owner of Outdoor Gear Lab in South Lake Tahoe, said.

McNamara was one of three speakers Nov. 9 talking about the region’s new economy. Rachel Arst McCullough with Tahoe Silicon Mountain in Truckee and Jamie Orr of Tahoe Mountain Lab in South Lake Tahoe were also on the panel. More than 30 people came to Lake Tahoe Community College to hear how business is different today compared to just a few years ago.



Rachel Arst McCullough, from left, Chris McNamara and Jamie Orr talk Nov. 9 about the region's changing economy. Photo/LTN

People in the Bay Area are realizing their job is not dependent that they be there. They are exchanging long commutes for bike rides and hikes. It's about living the Tahoe dream – immersing oneself in the natural environment, while still maintaining a career.

These “new” workers are also bringing a sense of community to the area.

“The new Tahoe economy is about breaking down silos. What do we want the community to look like as a whole?” Orr said.

She runs a shared workspace (which is completely full). Entrepreneurs, small businesses, nonprofits – they are working under one roof. Some resources are shared, while some enterprises have four walls unto themselves.

These people are then brainstorming among themselves to help each other. It's a different type of networking – beyond the traditional service club or chamber mixer. And as such, they bring others into the fold. In some ways today's work world is like the shared economies Airbnb and Uber have excelled at in their respective specialties only this is about independent

contractors creating a niche for themselves.

By creating this new workforce it could help normalize the economy because these jobs aren't dependent on tourists and therefore can provide stable employment. They aren't going to hire and fire based on the weather.

One thing McCullough pointed out is "if you want year-round jobs, you need year-round housing." Truckee, like the South Shore, has a shortage of long-term rentals.

One of the success stories in Truckee is the makers space where artists are working under one roof, much like how the businesspeople are operating at Tahoe Mountain Lab. Creating something similar is being talked about for the South Shore.