

Opinion: South Lake Tahoe's elusive vision

By Garry Bowen

As someone who attended the entire South Lake Tahoe City Council Valentine's Day devoted to a strategic priorities planning session, the organized list of invited presenters did indeed make the most of the items that are piling up, blocking potential progress toward a vision City Manager Nancy Kerry has correctly moved toward in both creating and edifying the myriad needs that were presented by some passionate and poignant presenters



Garry Bowen

The quote "There are no rules of architectures for a castle in the clouds" from Lord Gilbert Chesterton correctly implies a reason finding a South Tahoe vision has been so difficult – most of the tenure of its cityhood has been geared to following the major founding businesses, in this case Harveys and Harrah's (In order of beginning, as the other two majors have changed concepts several times in the same period; the fifth, an outlier, Lakeside Inn, was envisioned and originally built by Harvey Gross as Harvey's Inn.)

The city across the line has been in an infill mode ever since, as the shift in corporate attention also shifted the visitor-base toward themselves and away from its incorporated California business community. The Waystation included a

restaurant, dining room and bar in the building now occupied by Deb Howard, pizza, and chicken wings, as part of a time share all the way to the beach, now Tahoe Beach & Ski; the Tahoe Beach Retreat replaces both the Connolly (nee Koenig) pier and the Timber Cove Lodge, itself a replacement venture for Bob Maloff after the successful cash cow of the 600-unit Tahoe Inn.

The point for now is the same infrastructure remains, but we are now at a bare bones level as to what to do next, and have been in that position way too long as up and down revenue streams have barely kept up with the city's maintenance, let alone allow for the establishment of significant new ideas, concepts or direction, hence the strategic priorities.

After most of the presenters invited by members of the City Council were gone, they were followed by department heads, who, aside from the time spent extolling the worthiness of their staff, saw the biggest ideas as those requiring many capital improvements –the ongoing rec center, the possible Regan Beach – but we now don't have to worry about remodeling City Hall, as they chose to do that already.

A surprising very important issue came up: the dilapidated communications system of police, fire and emergency contacts, as they cannot readily contact each other; not-so-surprising was the attempt at moving South Lake Tahoe closer to the top item in David Jinkens survey quite a few years ago now: a safe and secure move in making the community green: 100 percent renewable energy, suggesting a revival of the ill-fated Sustainability Commission, etc.

What this writer tried to bring forth was the idea that most of the other requests/suggestions can easily be under the umbrella of sustainability, in actually moving the city in two ways: (1) toward the green community long desired, and (2) automatically easing the city beyond their only stance of "fiscal" sustainability, as both economy and ecology can now

be combined: sustainability as practiced in many places is found to be a “solution-multiplier” in that safe purchases made are of a quality that slows down the need to repurchase as much or as often.

This is a concept known as found money is used in large metropolis’; Kerry is becoming adept at this aspect, but it needs to be expanded to an overall green-level, both to satisfy the constituencies, and a personal mantra: “policies equal to the scenery.”

This also would steer clear of what is known as “the picture-postcard mentality” (a term coined by a PhD with the Forest Service), as people attracted here quite often include as a key reason “wanting to get away from either (1) the rat race, or (2) the concrete jungle, but don’t often bring environmental sensitivity with their move.

This is an unfortunate offshoot of a culture that emphasizes jobs (money) first over their surroundings.

In recent Tahoe times, we had a council candidate who downplayed “green” as an additional cost to all the known permitting issues, and a city manager who tried to gloss over the Mo’s’/Whole Foods/ Conservancy kerfuffle (another column’s term) with a comment: “It can still move ahead, but without as many environmental improvements” – this is indeed unfortunate from both viewpoints, as there are a number of projects that wildly exceed green expectations; in the alternative, there are still many design firms (architectural, engineering, interior, landscape, etc.) that do not fully comprehend the import of designing with (not against) nature.

Tahoe can become the beacon the agencies aspire and quite often claim to be with a mere upgrade in both information and attitude. We are too worried about a potential client’s pocketbook when they mostly only want to know what it’s going to cost. That’s all.

Kerry is to be commended for organizing the strategic priority planning day, and, by the same token, the perseverance of keeping the obscure vision (remember there were three distinct efforts a while back), and her use of a Warren Bennis quote (the first one below) can actually be combined with two others:

“Leadership is the capacity to translate vision into reality. ... The manager accepts the status quo; the leader challenges it. ... There are two ways of being creative: One can sing and dance: Or one can create an environment in which singers and dancers flourish.”— Tahoe is moving closer to realizing all three.

In the context of Tahoe’s future, a Chesterton quote as a title I chose, it seems to me (in hindsight of a half century, if not longer) that Tahoe is a place where many wanted to realize a dream of their own.

With a now more certain sense of pragmatic realities: snow, no snow, forests both sick and healthy, soil not as productive in protecting either; waterways either parched or flooded, all directions point to Green (note no more quotation marks), in getting sufficient value received with enough equity to help all those worthy presentations translate theirs – all of them were, after all, to be of benefit to the community – for example, there is already a Ski Run BID with which Chris McNamara can work – others can become.

I’ll close with Peter Senge, a mentor of mine: “We often spend so much time coping with problems along our path that we forget why we are on that path in the first place. The result is that we only have only a dim, or even inaccurate, view of what’s really important” (to our future).

Perhaps why we have been missing a vision? So now one can indeed be realized?

Garry Bowen has more than a 50-year connection to the South

Shore, with an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health.