

# TRPA rethinking how to deliver transit in Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

STATELINE – Free transit throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, integrated between the shores, and with service every 30 minutes. That's the goal by 2021.

Morgan Beryl, senior transportation planner with the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, on Feb. 22 went over the highlights of the draft 2017 Regional Transportation Plan with the Governing Board.

Technology has allowed transportation officials to get a better handle on how many people are actually coming to the basin – 24 million a year, in 10 million vehicles.

Beryl showed two pictures – one of gridlock (today), the other open streets (the future). The goal of the plan, she said, is to create the future.

Unlike so many planning documents, this one isn't just ideas. It has some how-to components, with achievable short-term goals, and loftier long-term goals if money were not an obstacle. Managing congestion, free bus service, bike paths that connect to places people want to go, and alternative fuel infrastructure are the immediate goals. (Yes, resuming service to Meyers is in the plans.)

Beryl told *Lake Tahoe News* the free bus service is attainable with current federal funding and grants. What is collected at the fare box isn't a large part of the revenue stream. When BlueGo, the South Shore bus service, offers free rides through spare the air days, people take a seat, proving there is a local desire for free transit.

The problem is the funding needed to keep the system operational is not guaranteed. That needs to be worked out before free bus service is offered. Officials are studying how other areas pay for free transit. Many locales have some sort of tax so there is a more defined revenue stream.

If buses came more often – it's every hour now – the thinking is more people would get on board. If buses went to more recreation areas, more people are apt to forego their personal vehicle. If buses allowed more bikes or had storage underneath like Greyhound does for personal items, people might not drive themselves. If BlueGo and TART – the North Shore system – were linked, it would mean the ability to commute as well as play throughout the basin.

Whatever is created needs to be flexible to handle the

## fluctuation in demand **Sass-y talk at TRPA**



An odd exchange with Austin Sass, who represents the city of South Lake Tahoe on the Governing Board, and staff involved the use of Lake Tahoe Airport and hotel rates.

Sass asked if the airport was part of the transportation study. Staff said not really other than to acknowledge it is a general aviation airport. Sass said, "The city's decision on commercial service can be reversed down the line. If you gave us a good reason, we might reverse it."

Perhaps Sass doesn't realize TRPA sued the city regarding the airport, which led to the 1992 Lake Tahoe Airport Master Plan Settlement Agreement. TRPA is not about to ask the city to resurrect commercial air service.

The city went through a lengthy master plan process recently that culminated in the council deciding not to pursue commercial service and to give up its certificate with the FAA that allowed for such operations. That master plan cost more than \$300,000.

It was obvious Wednesday that Sass has no idea what it takes to bring back commercial service. It's more than just taking a vote of the council.

On top of that, there would be the subsidy needed to make it happen even if an airline wanted to come to South Lake Tahoe.

Then Sass repeated things he read on Facebook where a marketing guy said higher hotel rates is the solution to getting fewer people to come here, which will help dissolve the traffic congestion issue.

In December, LosAngelesHotels.org reported that South Lake Tahoe had the highest hotel rates in the state for New Year's Eve. Clearly, higher rates don't stop people from coming to Tahoe.

Fewer people in town would help the roads, but not the economy.

Sass also asked if TRPA could mandate visitors use public transit. "No" was the answer.

*--Kathryn Reed*

Creating parking areas for people is something else that is being talked about. This would be a 180-degree policy change for TRPA. This bi-state regulatory agency has a penchant for approving projects with inadequate parking with the thinking it would get people out of their cars. The problem is people have nothing else to get into because bus service is abysmal.

Park and rides are common in larger areas. But even finding a spot to park at a public transit hub can be difficult as anyone who has ridden BART in the Bay Area knows.

Board member Shelly Aldean suggested areas with large lots might be encouraged to add space, albeit coverage would be an issue, that would be dedicated to those using transit. This would be for people who don't have immediate access to

transit, but could drive to a stop.

More long term goals include working with regional partners – Sacramento, Bay Area, Reno – to integrate ways to get tourists to Tahoe without them all driving. Rail is one idea. Having them park at an airport and come via bus is another. Or if they are flying into the region, to then have reliable shuttles to the basin.

It was acknowledged, though, that the basin needs to provide reliable public transit before regional transit solutions are solidified. Technology will help with that in being able to provide real-time information to customers and transit providers.

The TRPA transportation document was first approved in late 2012 and per federal law must be updated every four years.

Missing in action at Wednesday's meeting was half of the basin's local representation on the board. Neither El Dorado County Supervisor Sue Novasel nor Douglas County Commissioner Nancy McDermid were in attendance.

Today the Governing Board will convene for its annual strategic planning session. More detail about the transportation plan and how to fund aspects of it are expected to be discussed.

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#### **Notes:**

- Comments on the draft plan will be taken until March 24; email them to [mberyl@trpa.org](mailto:mberyl@trpa.org).
- The plan is available **online**.
- The TRPA Governing Board is expected to approve the final plan on April 26.