

Opinion: Tahoe lacks world class transportation

By Joanne Marchetta

As a national treasure offering world-class recreation opportunities, Lake Tahoe is one of the most popular outdoor destinations in Northern California and Nevada. And sometimes, being popular has its challenges.

Tahoe's limited roadways become congested during times of peak visitation, when thousands of people who live in nearby metropolitan areas get in their cars to drive up to our small mountain communities. Suddenly, a road system designed for 55,000 residents must handle four to five times that many cars on an average busy day.



Joanne
Marchetta

The strong winter storm earlier this March helped illustrate this congestion challenge. Heavy snow brought thousands of people to Lake Tahoe to enjoy a weekend of skiing. But that same snow closed Interstate 80 and Highway 50 on Sunday, when thousands of people were trying to drive home to Reno, Sacramento, or the San Francisco Bay Area. That large wave of simultaneous departures caused traffic to back up for hours in all directions, a situation made worse by the weather and road closures.

Traffic congestion is not a constant problem at Tahoe. But it is a challenge we must work together to solve, and one that cannot be solved simply by building bigger roads to handle more cars.

This congestion impacts more than the millions of annual visitors who want to come enjoy and appreciate the Jewel of the Sierra, and the quality of their experience. It impacts Tahoe's residents, their quality of life and ability to get to and from work and basic services, and the health of our environment.

The draft 2017 Regional Transportation Plan that TRPA has released for public comment identifies those times of peak visitation and the most heavily-visited destinations, and lays out strategies to improve our transportation system and better manage congestion. The plan builds upon the ongoing work by TRPA and many partners around the lake to create walkable, bikeable, transit-served communities; work that is starting to pay off as more people use trails and transit for shorter trips around town.

The plan focuses on three broad action categories—transit, trails, and technology—that can work together to provide new travel options from our community centers to popular recreation areas. We are focusing on this recreation travel because travel to recreation sites makes up nearly half of the vehicle trips made on any given day at Lake Tahoe.

By filling connectivity gaps in Lake Tahoe's network of bike and pedestrian trails, expanding transit service and frequency, and launching new applications and tools to provide people with real-time information about congestion, parking availability, and non-automotive travel options, we can make the transportation system more efficient, give people more convenient options to get to their destinations, and help inform and promote better travel decisions.

We cannot solve Lake Tahoe's traffic congestion challenges overnight, or with any one agency or local government working on its own. TRPA, local governments, and road departments are working together to improve the transportation system and transit services here at Lake Tahoe. We are also working with neighboring metropolitan areas to improve inter-regional travel options, and with communities throughout the Sierra Nevada to address the impacts of recreational travel.

If we all join forces, Lake Tahoe can make real, continued progress over the next five years. By working together carefully to make maximum use of reasonably foreseeable funding, we think that partners around the lake can provide free-to-the-user transit service; increase transit frequency from 60-minute to 30-minute intervals on all main routes; seamlessly connect transit services on the North and South shores; provide new or enhanced transit service to Meyers and Truckee; provide new transit service to heavily-visited recreation sites at Emerald Bay, Echo Summit, and Zephyr Cove; enhance limited inter-regional transit services to and from Reno and Sacramento; and build at least 20 miles of new shared use paths for bicyclists and pedestrians.

These improvements will not solve our congestion problem. But they will be a major step forward and make it much easier for people to travel around Lake Tahoe without driving a personal car.

And with seamless, frequent, and reliable transit service and a well-connected trail network throughout the Lake Tahoe Region, we will be in a much better position to pursue new funding needed to work with Reno, Sacramento, and the Bay Area to provide new transit services to Lake Tahoe from those growing metropolitan areas. Work on that front is already well under way.

Building the world-class transportation system Lake Tahoe deserves will take time, collaboration, and carefully phased

improvements. It will also take a change in everyone's behavior and a willingness to embrace non-automotive travel. As one of the many locals stuck on Highway 50 a few Sundays ago, I found myself remembering the old saying: "We are not stuck in traffic, we are traffic."

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.