

Opinion: Embracing change in South Lake Tahoe

By Jim Wire

Change is inevitable and necessary to build a better future for the growth of Lake Tahoe. Lake Tahoe is in the backyard of several growing population centers. Its proximity means that more people are seeking a temporary escape to the lakes and the mountains. With success comes the challenges. How do you better manage tourism to make it a better experience for both the tourists and locals?

The South Lake Tahoe community is divided about multiple issues such as vacation home rentals (VHRs), housing shortage/affordable housing, redevelopment and the new pilot program of LimeBikes. Having now been a Tahoe resident for over 34 years I've seen the town change and grow. I'd like to share some of my view points on these issues.

I'm sure many of you remember what it was like to survive the recession. There was loss of jobs, income, homes, etc. Tourism is now booming and we are all benefiting from the trickle-down economics. Vacation home rentals have become a large influence with the boost of tourism. It has created more jobs which are putting more dollars in the pockets of every local. Just ask all the people that service VHRs such as landscapers, maids, window cleaners, handymen, contractors, plumbers, snow removal, etc. Then ask all the people that serve them such as insurance brokers, accountants, doctors, dentists, etc. The list goes on.

With change comes adjustments. We were used to the quiet neighborhoods filled with empty homes, but now we see them being used on a more frequent basis. Our roads are more congested. To the disappointment of some, we now find

ourselves sharing space with more people. Those that do live here, should consider themselves lucky and privileged. It seems fair that we should be able to share our space with those from out of the area who do not enjoy the beauty of Lake Tahoe daily.

I'm not suggesting that we should tolerate bad behavior from a vacationer next door. Rather I believe that with the existing VHR regulations, better practices can and will develop. As law enforcement improves and rental management companies incorporate better practices for both tourists and residents there is ample opportunity for better experiences and prosperity.

Both law enforcement and rental management companies may not have been prepared to handle the increasing noise nuisance as tourism came booming back after the recession. In a panic, the South Lake Tahoe City Council had beefed up the existing laws and added more regulations on top of it. My initial reaction was that overregulation was not the answer. I'll be the first to admit that there were some good things that came out of it. Law enforcement had been given a specific directive for handling many of the nuisances and rental management companies became more responsive as well.

The City Council has already spent an enormous amount of time, money and energy on VHR regulation but apparently, they aren't done yet. On Sept. 5, they had considered more regulations that will ultimately reduce the number of VHR permits substantially. What they aren't considering are all the unforeseeable impacts to now existing jobs who service those VHR's.

What the City Council isn't telling you is that between the attrition rate of VHR permits and the slower VHR permit approval time, the number of homes with VHR permits are already declining. I believe that the City Council's time would be better spent on looking for ways to diversify and

grow the local economy rather than extinguishing the one that is currently sustaining us. If they kill a bunch of jobs, they better be prepared to replace them.

My next topic touches on both the housing shortage and affordable housing issues. In the 34 years that I've lived here, there's always been a housing shortage. Like most locals, I worked a couple of jobs to make a living. It was 20 years before I purchased my first home. If you want to increase the percentage of primary home ownership, then wages must increase. In a tourist economy, businesses will never be able offer high enough wages to compete with the second home buyers. Without a more diversified economy, it's just not possible. The city could be more successful at increasing primary home ownership through attracting new industries and those able to work remotely from home or within a business center here.

It's true that local businesses are finding it difficult to find employees because of the lack of affordable housing. It has more to do with a static supply and a growing demand. Then who is responsible for creating housing for the work force? Maybe it makes sense to dedicate housing that is deed restricted to low income individuals and families. In my opinion, the weekly motel rentals are a good candidate for work-force housing redevelopment. Businesses that benefit from workforce housing should also contribute to fund it. A new creation or reinstatement of a redevelopment agency (or similar group) could possibly bring new life and organization to this issue. It will take a combination of private funds, government subsidies and government cooperation. Working together, the private and public sector should be able to cut the red tape and make work-force housing happen within a reasonable amount of time.

Lastly, I'm surprised by the recent controversy over the LimeBikes. This is the thing that will give both visitors and locals better accessibility to enjoy our communities and

business areas even more. These bikes are for general easy riding and fill the niche for anyone who wishes to get out and about without the addition of another traffic inducing vehicle. With more people cycling locally our bike shops will benefit with a boost in cycling Tahoe.

As commuter and recreational cycling grows, infrastructure must be developed to make it safer and more convenient. Already tourists are braving Highway 50 and risking their lives. Tahoe has been the recipient of more federal and state dollars because we are the gem of the nation. It's embarrassing that as locals, we show our appreciation by getting in our cars to go up and down the Lake Tahoe Boulevard corridor (Highway 50). Are we incapable of coming up with a better alternative? Our bus system has a lot of inefficiencies. We should applaud the efforts of the LimeBikes.

Redevelopment is the answer to environmental protection and it has become the mantra of the TRPA for a good reason. There is still a need to redevelop much of the old and obsolescent commercial structures. Redevelopment cannot be accomplished without a public and private partnership. To build environmentally responsible structures you need developers. The process for redevelopment may not be perfect but it can be made better! By improving infrastructure for cycling and walkability, it should be possible to reduce Highway 50 traffic congestion.

South Lake Tahoe has been changing since I arrived 34 years ago and it will continue to do so. Much of it is positive but it doesn't come without some growing pains. What if there were affordable condos instead of run down motels? What if we had more locals working remotely from home which could bring higher wages to Lake Tahoe? With higher wages, maybe it is possible for more locals to afford a home. With better bike lanes along Highway 50 and throughout the neighborhoods, maybe it is possible to rely on bicycles as a better mode of

transportation. Let's work together in a more positive and productive manner. With vision and focus, we can find a solution to make Lake Tahoe a better experience for tourists and locals. That's a Tahoe I want to live and thrive in.

Jim Wire is a real estate agent with Chase International.