Prosperity Center designed to create economic paradise

By Kathryn Reed

“Oh, think twice. It’s just another day for you and me in paradise. Just think about it.”



Is the Lake Tahoe Basin really paradise?

• Latest unemployment figure for South Lake Tahoe is 17.4 percent

• 7,000 jobs in gaming have been lost since 1990

• The basin lost 15 percent of its population from 2000 to 2008

• 80 percent of the basin’s Latino population lives at the poverty level

• Hotel room occupancy was at 23 percent in 2008-09

• 17.7 percent of the residents in South Lake Tahoe lived below the poverty line in 2008

• In 12 years the South Shore K-12 enrollment declined 35 percent

• 26.4 percent of children under 18 live below the poverty line.

On the flip side, based on 2007 statistics, the Lake Tahoe Basin generated $4.7 billion in revenues.

Lake Tahoe’s built environment does not match its natural beauty. Infrastructure is decaying or non-existent. Jobs are dwindling. The middle class barely has a heartbeat.

To combat the issues identified above and to bring a sense of place to the basin, the Prosperity Center is scheduled to open May 1. Offices will be on the North and South shores, with the idea the space will be donated for the greater good.

The Lake Tahoe Basin Prosperity Plan has been in the works for a couple years, with the government bodies around the lake, chambers of commerce, education, health care providers, tourism interests and others forming the plan that is designed to be an economic blueprint for the entire basin, including Truckee.

Michael Ward, project manager for the LTBPP, has been working for free as facilitator. He’s been making presentations around the lake, with the latest before the South Tahoe Public Utility District board last week.

He showed a video, mostly in black and white, which was a bit chilling. As the song “Another Day in Paradise” played, images of despair throughout the basin were shown – boarded up businesses, for rent signs, people living in squalor, slides with sobering statistics.

Then the last image was in color – a panoramic view of Lake Tahoe. It was taken from a distance, as though to obscure the reality when one looks closer, beyond the lake and the trees.

“I think we can help broker opportunities,” Ward told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. The goal is to have a homegrown economy based on what is working and not importing industry that doesn’t exist.

During the research phase it was discovered that two-thirds of the basin’s economy is from three areas – tourism and visitor services, environmental innovation, and health and wellness.

Those sectors will be the focus of the Prosperity Center.

A reason to take a regional approach is grant dollars are more readily doled out to larger groups working on a common goal than to individual entities doing so. Plus, this should mean entities in the basin would not be competing against each other for the same dollars.

Ironically, the South Tahoe PUD knows all about a regional approach when it comes to federal dollars. The district joined forces with other water districts in the basin a few years ago, which has paid dividends.

Other reasons for the regional approach are the problems are similar as are the interests.

To date the five counties and one city that make up the Lake Tahoe Basin have put in a total of $125,000 into the project. This money is for matching funds for Economic Development Administration grants, some of which have already been secured.

The Prosperity Center, though expected to open in six weeks, cannot do so until its nonprofit status is secure. In the interim, the Parasol Foundation in Incline Village is acting as conduit for grants in the center’s name.

A board of directors, though not named yet, is likely to be large and made up of representatives from many of the entities that worked on the plan. It could be comprised of a couple dozen people.

Ward said the idea to have it be a comprehensive board.

From there, advisory committees will be formed to get down to the nitty gritty.

“We have five or six initiatives we think will be game changers,” Ward said.

Bringing broadband to the basin is one goal. The idea is current residents and businesses will benefit from it, but it will also attract others to the area. Creating a regional sports commission is another immediate goal.

Ward did not want to elaborate too much until the center is a reality so as not to get into a legal quagmire.

More information about the Lake Tahoe Basin Prosperity Plan is on the group’s website.