Lake Tahoe tourism officials strive to be relevant

By Kathryn Reed

OLYMPIC VILLAGE – Is Lake Tahoe relevant? Relevant to those planning a vacation, that is.

This is a question those in the tourism business must ask themselves – especially after attending the 37th annual Mountain Travel Symposium at the Resort at Squaw Creek.

"Now every community between here and the Bay Area has an event and a website. Back in the day Tahoe had minimal competition," Carl Ribaudo said. The president of South Lake Tahoe-based Strategic Marketing Group spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* in between workshops April 18. "We have to change the look, not just for tourists, but for locals."

Lake Tahoe wants to be relevant to people eager to travel. Photo/Kathryn Reed

He wants the South Shore to become more relevant for locals and tourists. Two ways to do that, he believes, are by improving the infrastructure and adding special events to the calendar.

It was reiterated at the various workshops that competition is getting greater among destinations. Nearly every town touts its attributes to would-be travelers.

Tahoe has a beautiful lake, but other locations have bigger ski mountains, more robust mountain biking, extravagant casinos, five-star lodging, shopping, reliable public transit and other amenities travelers are looking for.

The difference, though, is Tahoe – all shores combined – has the whole package. While marketing gurus work together on occasion, notably last year's Tour de California bike race, usually it's North v. South.

As Dan McHale, general manager of Inn by the Lake in South Lake Tahoe, said, he was glad to come to Squaw so he could drive around the lake, see what is going on, because it's easy to feel isolated.

Those involved with Tahoe's tourism have also become complacent in some ways. Some business owners believe Tahoe sells itself. Not so. Look at the vacancy signs – even on holiday weekends. People aren't coming to Tahoe like they used to. Part of the reason is because they have other choices, part of the reason is because the area is stale.

Carol Chaplin, executive director of Lake Tahoe Visitors Authority, believes those speaking at the multi-day conference reaffirmed her agency's beliefs.

"Those who have the passion for recreational activities-sports are those who will continue to spend on those experiences," Chaplin said.

She added that the conference, which is touted as the largest gathering of mountain travel professionals in North America, "Confirmed also that our products-services need to be relevant. That would mean a hard look at those – including infrastructure – to understand if we have what it takes."

While the conference is about mountain destinations, with a focus on winter activities – skiing and snowboarding in particular, it didn't stop Tony Lyle, marketing chief of Aramark on the South Shore, from attending. His company runs Zephyr Cove Resorts, which includes snowmobiling, the lodge, stables, and the paddle-wheelers that launch from there and Ski Run Marina.

"Tahoe is unique. It has all these different opportunities," Lyle said. "You can get on the lake, that is my pitch."

It's a mantra other ski towns cannot boast about.

He has been successful in telling that story to visitors this season. The boats have been full when the lift lines were non-existent.

Tourism is Lake Tahoe's economy. It's also big business throughout the world. That is why this area of California and Nevada is striving to keep a hold of the market it has and then increase it.

The World Travel & Tourism Council says the global tourism industry is twice the size of the automotive manufacturing sector and about one-third larger than chemicals manufacturing.

The council says U.S. travelers contribute $2 trillion to the world economy.

Andy Chapman, marketing guru for North Lake Tahoe Resort Association, smiles when talking about having more than 1,000 tourism professionals in his back yard for nearly a week.

"The best way to sell it is for them to witness it," Chapman said moments before he participated in a panel discussion on social media.

With Squaw Valley as a backdrop, snow glistening and finally covering all the runs, it is hard not to see Tahoe as an

Olympic-caliber destination.

But driving the roads, looking at dilapidated infrastructure and knowing the Ritz-Carlton at Northstar is the only five-star lodging property in the area, proves Lake Tahoe doesn’t have it all.

As Chaplin said, the conference, “Confirmed also that our products-services need to be relevant. (It) confirmed that LTVA is getting there, but is not there.”