Opinion: TRPA’s 21st century role is fostering regional cooperation

By Joanne Marchetta

The Lake Tahoe Regional Plan update has spurred many important discussions about the vision for Lake Tahoe and what future role the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency should play. As we consider changes to TRPA’s goals and policies, we’re taking a hard look at how the agency can add the most value to our lake and community. TRPA’s role is changing in the 21st century, and our history foretells the need for change.

Since its creation in 1969, TRPA’s role has touched the spectrum of resource protection and land use planning, evolving as needs change. At first, TRPA’s primary role was to stop subdivision sprawl in the Lake Tahoe Basin. However, without regulatory teeth, the agency’s effectiveness was limited and some environmentally harmful developments were allowed in the 1970s. In 1980, the states redefined TRPA’s role by revising the Bi-State Compact and assigning cutting-edge environmental targets called Threshold Carrying Capacities.



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Through the 1990s, TRPA implemented a development code that

ensured new buildings and remodels helped move environmental goals forward. However, little was done to repair and restore past damage, nor was much done to apply modern environmental design to buildings that existed before TRPA was created – which make up the bulk of our development today.

With the initiation of the Lake Tahoe Environmental Improvement Program in 1997, TRPA took a leadership role to bring together more than 50 organizations to implement ecosystem restoration. That regional cooperation role continues to define the agency as competition for public funding increases and the need for strategic collaboration across boundaries grows.

TRPA's collaboration brings a basinwide, coordinated approach to critical programs like transportation, stormwater infiltration, and the emergent threats of aquatic invasive species and catastrophic wildfire. With California's greenhouse gas reduction bill, SB375, TRPA is providing the coordinated framework for regional compliance. TRPA has secured substantial state and federal grant funds to assist local governments in meeting new mandates while at the same time advancing innovative policies proposed in the Regional Plan update.

Similarly, the Lake Tahoe Total Maximum Daily Load creates a framework for local improvements and the need for regional cooperation. The TMDL in itself is a quantum leap forward for Lake Tahoe. Adopted by the two states and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency in 2011, the program better defines water quality goals by setting pollution reduction targets for each jurisdiction, but it also leaves implementation up to local governments.

TRPA plans to work with the states and local jurisdictions to secure the funds necessary to implement stormwater improvements. While the expense of continued water quality restoration is daunting in the face of shrinking government

funds, by working together in this cooperative framework, we have a greater opportunity to position Tahoe as a national treasure worthy of additional government and private investment.

TRPA's updated land use policies in the proposed Regional Plan update are again moving TRPA's touch-point on the spectrum of resource protection. To restore the lake's clarity, our policy updates will help build the public-private partnerships needed to meet TMDL reduction targets. The draft plan provides economic incentives and an improved permitting system for property owners in order to encourage environmental redevelopment of rundown properties. With more permitting responsibilities shifting to local governments, TRPA can focus on important regional environmental issues.

In the area of monitoring and research, TRPA's unique role is to apply the scientific findings of research institutions and others studying Lake Tahoe. For more than 40 years, TRPA has been using the best available science to shape policies. As new scientific information becomes available, that role has grown stronger. Researchers are monitoring socioeconomic impacts of redevelopment, studying the effects of climate change on Lake Tahoe, and uncovering the factors that affect clarity of near shore waters. TRPA will use scientific findings to update regional policies more frequently in a 4-year cycle in order to ensure regulations don't become stale.

If you'd like to learn more about TRPA's changing role in Lake Tahoe's future, come to our Community Appreciation Day event at our offices on Lower Kingsbury Grade on Sept. 27 from 4-7pm. This event is TRPA's way of showing our appreciation for the often unknown everyday efforts around the basin that help create a healthy, sustainable Lake Tahoe. For more information, go online.

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