

Opinion: Douglas County doing its part to preserve Tahoe

By Steve Mokrohisky

The future of Lake Tahoe's natural and built environment, as well as how best to protect its pristine waters, has been debated at length over the past several years. The conclusion of thousands of residents, visitors, businesses, environmentalists, scientists, local governments and others who participated in the Tahoe Regional Plan update is that the status quo is unacceptable and the need to improve the environment, economy and community through redevelopment is imperative.

On Aug. 28, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board will consider approval of Douglas County's local area plan for the South Shore of Lake Tahoe. The new area plan is the first to be developed under TRPA's Regional Plan update, was created through years of extensive public engagement and encourages environmental redevelopment of existing buildings.



Steve
Mokrohisky

Leading the way as the first entity to propose a new local area plan, Douglas County has appropriately been held to the highest standard of environmental review and has welcomed the opportunity to gather public feedback, answer questions and engage in thoughtful dialogue about how to ensure the best

local plan for the South Shore and the future of Lake Tahoe.

Despite broad public support and clear data detailing the environmental benefits of the new plan, a representative from the Sierra Club stated recently in a radio interview that “local governments can’t be trusted to hold the line on development.”

Unfortunately, inflammatory statements like this ignore the facts on the ground and offer no solutions to improve the environment. In the interest of transparent and thoughtful public debate, let us consider the facts.

Strong record on the environment

Douglas County, its businesses and residents have a strong record of investment in environmental improvements. Nearly \$1.7 billion has been invested in environmental improvements at Lake Tahoe since 1997, including over 31 water quality and erosion control projects in Douglas County.

Eighteen percent of Lake Tahoe’s shoreline resides in Douglas County, but only 3 percent of the fine sediment material that degrades the clarity of the lake originates in Douglas County – the least amount of runoff of any jurisdiction in the Tahoe basin.

In addition, Douglas County businesses and residents have some of the highest best management practice compliance rates in the Tahoe basin. As a result of these investments, the clarity of Lake Tahoe is already beginning to improve.

Beyond Lake Tahoe, Douglas County has protected over 15,000 acres in the Carson Valley and seeks to protect an additional 15,000 acres as part of its federal lands bill. The county has spent five years developing its lands bill, not because there is a bi-state regulatory agency requiring it to protect the environment, but rather because our local residents and local government have chosen environmental stewardship as the right

thing to do for future generations.

We don't need more, we need better

The vast majority of future projects will be redevelopment of existing infrastructure, not new development. There is very little available private land to build on in Douglas County at Lake Tahoe, as only 16 percent of the land is in private ownership, only eight residential building allocations are allowed this year and only 36,250 square feet is available for new commercial projects.

Local businesses and lodging industry experts are often the first to remind us that we don't need more hotel rooms in the South Shore, as we already have thousands of tourist units with an average rate of less than \$100 and an annual occupancy rate of 28 percent. Many of these units should be relocated, redeployed or retired, thereby reducing the quantity and improving the quality.

Too much of the built environment at Lake Tahoe is blighted and has outlived its useful life, resulting in harm to the health of the natural environment. Private investment in redevelopment of existing buildings will allow residents and businesses to improve their properties, increase energy efficiency, reduce storm water runoff and enhance the economic and environmental quality in the Tahoe basin.

The Edgewood Lodge project is a great example of private investment that seeks to improve the environment by preventing 500,000 pounds of sediment per year from entering Lake Tahoe, restoring numerous acres of wetlands and improving recreational opportunities, while increasing the quality of lodging and economic vitality in the area. The environmentally beneficial redevelopment projects under the old Regional Plan have been exhausted. We need the new Regional Plan and local area plans that encourage environmental gain through redevelopment.

There is no question that thousands of people are unified in the strong desire to improve the environment through redevelopment at Lake Tahoe. There is also no question that open and thoughtful public debate supported by facts is at the cornerstone of our democracy.

So, the next time you hear someone claim that the new Regional Plan update and local area plans will result in harm to the environment, ask them for facts to support their claim, as well as solutions to improve the environment, economy and community. Those of us who live, work and play in Douglas County are committed to keeping Lake Tahoe blue and turning our community green.

Steve Mokrohisky is county manager of Douglas County and served as Nevada's local government representative on the bi-state consultation group that facilitated solutions to the final draft of the Regional Plan update. This column is written on behalf of Douglas County and its Board of Commissioners.