

Opinion: Time for Tahoe to act, not just react

By Garry Bowen

The summer of 1997 was indeed a heady time: coffee with Deputy Secretary of Agriculture Richard Rominger at the Lone Eagle Grill in Incline; a lawn meeting with Assistant Secretary of Agriculture Jim Lyons at Tallac, entertaining an invitation to join an upcoming panel on Forest Health, the result of my having written a white paper to Vice President Al Gore's domain while in the White House (the Office of Environmental Quality) on behalf of both of Tahoe's Resource Conservation Districts, offspring's of the USDA Forest Service's "first cousin", the Natural Resource Conservation Service.

To this day, the NRCS and the RCD serve the Tahoe basin very well, in so many ways across the community, as well as most of the other local agency efforts. But while the community needs to be reminded of this important ongoing work at various times, it is Monday's visit by Al Gore that will be the subject of yet another reminder.



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Those "heady times" came to mind at Sand Harbor on Aug. 19 as it became apparent to me that we have been missing the enthusiasm with which he spoke that morning, in spite of the emerging danger that he's been so battered by in pointing out. Denying that climate change is now so obviously upon us seems

to make the dwindling numbers even more vociferous, and the squeaky wheel still gets way too much credence, to our continued detriment.

When Gore can attest that “it is time to renew our commitment . . . to go the rest of the way,” he was not just talking about our local efforts at reestablishing the hallowed clarity of Lake Tahoe, but more in the vein of his other comments about climate change in referring to the release of “90 million tons of CO₂ that will be released today” into the sky like it’s an “open sewer”. That his enthusiasm leads to “hope ... tempered by a realization that much more has to be done” really reflected that from now on, Lake Tahoe could in fact “be a symbol, not in name only, but to truly and genuinely play a vital role in inspiring the (rest of) the world” as to the importance of preserving the systems that support all of life, not just the local budgetary concerns of contributing to any public/private partnership – for the time being.

He said the original presidential summit, all those years ago, “was accomplished without partisanship or ideology” and that Lake Tahoe still retains the “chance to move beyond that”. He also went beyond the now-regular boundary of each year’s annual summit by upping the ante in saying that Tahoe should now think about spawning an annual global event with “awe-inspiring and demonstrable” examples of the “cooperation” that makes him so proud of being a part of bringing attention to Lake Tahoe in the latter part of the last century. “Awe-inspiring and demonstrable” examples are, of course, a missing ingredient.

Unfortunately, the word cooperation has to be “in quotes” for now, as the necessary community spirit to match Gore’s enthusiasm, vim and vigor for his subject matter is not yet as readily apparent as needed, in that local dealings are still not so much about change as they are about maintaining whatever the power structure thinks of itself as “leading” – bringing the slippage back up to par, instead of instituting

the types of change that would suit them better. Joanne Marchetta of TRPA is right: “it will take (much) more than growth control and design standards for new buildings”: it will take individual recognition and responsibility to meet or exceed those standards and to sincerely care enough about our surroundings that there is active participation in creating truly sustainable lifestyles ... life will soon depend upon it on unheard-of levels.

Active participation means that Lake Tahoe not just be thought of in terms of its natural beauty (all of nature has a beauty of its own) or as a function of any “picture-postcard mentality” (a term coined by an economist with the Forest Service Research Station), currently favored for real-estate valuations.

For Gore’s energetic statements from Monday, Tahoe will have to learn of the subtle (but profound) distinction between aiming for “sustainable communities”, seemingly just a step or two from where we now find ourselves, and in learning the certain significance of scientific sustainability in restoring life-giving processes.

To truly match Gore’s enthusiastic support in thinking of Tahoe as a “model for combating global warming” (surely we’ll want to think of ourselves that way, but then conflate and deny what it will actually take to do so). The ability-to-sustain will actually have to be taught, but fortunately there are easy ways to do that – aside from any mere program that the powers-that-be think will be sufficient and politically correct.

Even the mighty EPA decided in late 2011 that our global problems are so daunting that no individual program will work, so they have called for sustainability to be “embedded” in everything they do, from administration, to policy, to implementation. If Gore’s suggestion is to be realized and we think about becoming a global beacon for answers, then we’d

better create better questions as to how to “get there”, so Tahoe does not trip itself up in trying to be what others already know they’re not: sustainable.

“Going the rest of the way” does not mean “more-of-the-same (just a little different)” – it means embracing the tremendous work of the Sustainable Sites Initiative, the U.S. Green Building Council, the International Living Future Institute, and the very people who work every day wanting to make a difference right here in the Basin and in all of the outdoor world – Tahoe is not in a vacuum, but it can resonate with a renewed emphasis of using the resources it gets with the very best leverage possible – that’s an important beacon of its’ own – “good enough for government” is not anymore – but can be.

As William McDonough, the “mastermind of sustainable development” said, “it will take more than simply being ‘less bad’ ”, or even Jerry Garcia (Grateful Dead), “picking between the lesser of two evils is still evil”.

The foregoing is an adequate reflection of what’s been learned in the interim 15 years since those heady days headed up by Senator Reid’s orchestration of a first-time visit anywhere by a sitting president and vice president, and the ongoing support of both our states’ senatorial contingent – but Gore’s rallying cry early this week calls for much more than “more of the same (but better)” as Marchetta implies.

The world is actually waiting for such a leadership example; why not Lake Tahoe? It is most decidedly not “the sustainability powerhouse of the nation”, but could be, with the right motivational direction – do we dare extend ourselves to meet such a challenge?

It took 16 years for Gore to stir us up once more – can we stand another decade or more again? I think not.

Garry Bowen has a 50-year connection to the South Shore, with

an immediate past devoted to global sustainability, on most of its current fronts: green building, energy and water efficiencies, and public health. He may be reached at tahoefuture@gmail.com or (775) 690.6900.