# Opinion: Collaborate over good policy

**By Steve Urie**

In a recent op-ed released to regional news services (*Lake Tahoe News*, Nov. 20), Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Executive Director Joanne Marchetta wrote: “TRPA is taking partnership to the next level and is making ‘epic collaboration’ its central strategic goal.” She went on to say that the Compact between California and Nevada that created TRPA was to “harmonize the needs of the region as a whole so as to ensure equilibrium between the region’s natural endowment and its man-made environment.”



Steve Urie

That may have been the intent, but it hasn’t been — nor will be — the reality. When TRPA was formed in 1969, on the Nevada side of the border a race was under way to see who could build the largest and gaudiest casino, and on the California side developers had already converted Tahoe’s most important wetlands into a 1,500-homesite marina community. Whether by shrewd planning or blind luck, in constructing TRPA the states agreed to a 15-member board of governors with seven voting members from each state and the 15th to be a non-voting federal appointee. Gridlock was assured, all development ceased, and the basin’s environment was spared further mass destruction.

The constant policy tug-of-war between developers, environmentalists, and agencies from two states and six local governments guarantees that only the very wealthy and very patient can afford to navigate Tahoe's development process. And as a result, mercifully the basin's land-use is locked in the 1970s. Contrary to Marchetta's lofty goal, since its inception TRPA has been spectacularly unsuccessful in creating collaboration, much less harmony, between developers, environmentalists, and the Basin's residents and three million annual visitors.

Even the two state legislatures that created TRPA are in constant conflict over Tahoe's land-use and development policies. Less than two years ago, TRPA was precariously close to being shut down because there was no collaboration between Nevada and California. Seven times since 1975, Nevada has threatened to withdraw from TRPA when they believed the agency was unaccommodating to their needs. Only because California Gov. Jerry Brown understands that the bureaucratic standoff overseen by the TRPA Board of Governors assures that a 1960's-style development free-for-all doesn't return to the basin does TRPA still exist. At Lake Tahoe, it's not collaboration that maintains environmental equilibrium, but contentious ongoing policy gridlock.

But that's not to say that there is no collaboration at Lake Tahoe. Since 1997 when President Bill Clinton promised federal money "to protect Lake Tahoe's environment, and with it the area's economy and quality of life," there has been epic collaboration between the more than 50 agencies, universities, and organizations that have cozied up with TRPA to share in the more than $100 million that has annually flowed to environmental programs managed by the federal agency.

That kind of serious money attracts those whose paychecks are underwritten by the public like pigs to slop and has bought major collaboration from the basin's public service employees. But that money is drying up, and with Congress as

contentiously gridlocked as the TRPA Board of Governors, the prospects of California Sen. Dianne Feinstein's $415 million Lake Tahoe Restoration Act passing and replenishing TRPA's environmental coffers continues to dim.

Of the $1.7 billion spent on environmental projects, more than $100 million has gone toward environmental research, monitoring, and technical assistance. One of the research and environmental program centerpieces implemented on Marchetta's watch is the Asian clam control program. In her op-ed, she says of it: "At iconic Emerald Bay, divers are removing five acres of rubber mats that were laid down to control an infestation of harmful invasive Asian clams. The collaborative project not only reduces the population of non-native clams, but also studies the mats' effectiveness as a way to control other invasive species populations in the lake."

That summary of the multi-million-dollar program by the head of the agency responsible for scientific and fiscal oversight of the program is stunningly uninformed, self-serving, and naïvely wrong. By all measurements, the Asian clam control program was a disaster, and TRPA staff says that it's probable that the 35 tons of rubber mats that covered Emerald Bay are currently being put into storage and will never be taken out.

Two years ago amid much media hype when the mats were rolled out, Tahoe Environmental Research Center Director Geoffrey Schladow said that the project was "already a scientific success." Since then Schladow and three other researchers concluded in an obscure $264,000 Forest Service study that "it is difficult to understand the efficacy of a large scale [clam] treatment program. [And] a hypothetical 100-acre area for [clam] treatment indicates that total costs of treatment can range [up] to $26 million." That's a lot of money to kill tiny mollusks that cause no harm.

Yet at this summer's Tahoe Summit, Schladow glossed over the project's failures and boasted to the politicians and

environmental stewards that 90 percent of the clams under the mats had been killed. He neglected to tell the 400 dignitaries and contributors that at least a dozen native species had been decimated along with the non-native clams, and that the clams would repopulate Emerald Bay in about the same time as it took to suffocate most of them.

Even though by all observations and measurements the $900,000 Emerald Bay project to "control" the benign clams was a complete disaster, in a thinly veiled appeal for more funding, Schladow recently said that whether Asian clams should be suffocated under rubber mats in the future is now "a community decision of do we want to try to control these [clams] at a cost, or throw up our hands and say, 'that's it.'"

It's not only gratuitous but irresponsible for one of the basin's leading environmental researchers to toss his failures back to the community and imply that because he didn't receive enough money to continue his program, it's not his fault if a project fails, but the community's – an accusation sure to foster harmonious collaboration between the public and the scientific community. (Two years ago, Schladow started referring all attempts at technical collaboration from this correspondent to TRPA.)

The plan to eradicate Asian clams may be the most ecologically destructive invasive species control plan ever employed – and it not only didn't work, but destroyed many times the number of Tahoe's native aquatic animals as it did non-native clams. Yet, Marchetta points to it as a model project that underscores the value of TRPA's Environmental Improvement Program.

TRPA is charged with oversight of the basin's invasive species programs, and the report to the Forest Service says that all data was given to the Lake Tahoe Asian Clam Working Group. When asked who the working group members were and what was reported in their minutes. TRPA's public information officer

wrote: “No minutes are kept as this is an informal working group. We generally keep minutes for meetings where policy decisions are made. The meetings are open to all stakeholders. Each interested organization is represented by appropriate staff members, and there is no selection process for which organizations attend.”

If millions are spent to carpet the bottom of one of the world’s scenic wonders with rubber matting is not a policy decision, the public is not considered a Tahoe stakeholder, and environmental programs are determined by an informal group of various agencies’ staff at unpublished meetings, it’s concerning what other informal decisions TRPA is making.

And if TRPA and their scientific partners are going to blame environmental failures on a lack of funding and invoke the community’s best interests when launching new programs, it only seems equitable that the community be allowed to participate in the environmental decisions of how their money is spent.

TRPA wasn’t formed to create collaborations. Its charter is straightforwardly simple: the agency is to protect and restore the Tahoe basin’s environment for all. And hopefully, Marchetta’s plans for epic collaboration include the public in those decisions that most affect them and their environment.

In a September op-ed Marchetta said, “Tahoe is standing on a fiscal cliff and the ground is sloughing off beneath our feet. Staring straight into an impending breakdown in funding, we are seeking another breakthrough. To that end, we are bringing our best creative thinking, our greatest drives toward innovation, our entrepreneurial spirit, and our strongest collaborative skills to imagining new funding sources, new collaborations and partnerships.”

Harmonious collaboration would certainly make TRPA Executive Director Marchetta’s job much easier, and it doesn’t take much

imaginative thinking or creative entrepreneurial skill to understand that the best way to get public support is to allow their participation, listen to their wants, spend their money wisely, and collaboration will then follow.

*Steve Urie is a 40-year Tahoe-Truckee resident and is the author of "Tessie, Quagga Mussels, and Other Lake Tahoe Myths". To learn more about Tahoe's AIS programs and to sign a petition asking TRPA to perform an independent aquatic invasive species risk assessment, go online.*