

Opinion: Is Tahoe a glass half full?

By Garry Bowen

Consolidating what seems to be a frenetic effort to actually define South Lake Tahoe, especially in the last few months, for this article we'll start with Feb. 21, when South Tahoe officials strategized about *a future* (not *the* future as originally titled).

As moderator, Ted Gaebler (co-author of "Reinventing Government", 1992), asked them each to offer an unalloyed expression of a vision, and, as subsequent meetings like the very recent tourism forum tried to do the same, twice now, with Park City presentations (the first was last summer at a leadership forum at MontBleu), an appropriate vision would seem to be rather cloudy or opaque, at best, as our best minds need a most-needed added focus to bring any vision to fruition. The best will be their own persuasion.



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To that end, I remain entranced with yet another book title: Joan Baez's brother-in-law Richard Farina wrote a book called "I've Been Down So Long, It Looks like Up to Me", which is why I used the word frenetic above, as someone still thinks of Tahoe as in the doldrums, needing a significant boost so as to be able to look up.

In spite of one leader's earlier idea that "South Shore is poised for growth", this was somewhat fortified by City Manager Nancy Kerry's comment at the strategy session that, "South Shore is starting to take hold", although the question of what exactly its taking hold of mirrors *Lake Tahoe News'* report – "barely touched upon was how to turn the ideas into reality", tabled, as a lot of things are, for yet another "(budget) meeting in April".

The running theme from that and the one just concluded is a lack of vision as Kerry stated in February, "Until we know who we are, we won't know why we are doing it" and there is "no shared agreement of who we are". This ironically coincides with the message that Park City emphasized (perhaps led by forum organizers as subject matter), also fortified by yet another forum, that of Tahoe Regional Young Professionals, as Jamie Orr and Scott Fair on that panel said that Tahoe "needs to decide", respectively, "what it wants to be when it grows up" and "what it wants to look like". So, what's been envisioned so far?

We are in the ramp-up to South Lake Tahoe's 50th birthday. In 1965, the slogan was "America's All-Year Playground", eerily reminiscent of the current vision proffered. The major difference is in the corporate leadership we continue to rely on, as they went decidedly covetous of their customer base over the years, not really understanding Tahoe's real attractions, for the sake of job and bottom-line profit protection.

Harrah's, for example, gained prominence by what real estate still knows as "location, location, location" – being the first place encountered as the state line was crossed, they placed a very-wide parking entry there, the better to welcome those coming to patronize. The mistake was in making that subservient to hotel interests (on both sides), shifting significant cash flows away from their own business model.

Today's re-emphasis on recreation is partly due to not understanding how it worked back-in-the-day. If someone no longer wanted to "play" at the casino corridor, they could very quickly redeem their car and be on their way to whatever other Tahoe attraction beckoned, as there was almost immediately five or six cars entering to take their place to everyone's benefit, resident and visitor alike with a much higher experiential value.

Also misunderstood was Harrah's commitment to its visiting clientele (comprising the now-decimated lodging community), as the South Shore room bookings were designed to "make hay while the sun shines" (i.e., the reason the best-known entertainers were always three weeks in July), thereby filling most of the motels in town for the entire summer, not being able to trust the other seasons to build the numbers up, or not to be able to adequately access the South Shore due to Echo closures, etc. That was their strategy – the roads may be closed or be inaccessible; family school years that shifted, etc., but business went on, at least partially by a Harrah's-Greyhound bus system I had a hand in organizing – as shift work demanded customers, if full employment were to be: food-on-the-table, clothes-to-buy, etc.

As corporate ownership came about (remember, Harvey Gross and Bill Harrah were entrepreneurial), bottom-line issues became higher concerns, corporate leaders in their brilliance ended up "exporting" gaming everywhere, which also ended up being a cause celebre for ill-managed civic and tribal municipalities to satisfy beyond their means. This of course was at the expense of a place like South Shore, absent other business vitality, but where it all began.

Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce Executive Director B Gorman has stated that this decline was in 1997, but it actually started with the above-mentioned shift (late 1970s and on), as the momentum was great enough to not have anyone notice any abrupt change, therefore not making needed

adjustments, until the lodging industry kept turning over and over as earlier expectations of buying one were not met.

That turnover included a continual rotating cast change so it became difficult to conjure up a vision, absent knowing what the issues really are from a historical perspective, one that I'm intimately familiar with. For example, the shift in Harrah's ownership from a five-star hotel sold to an essentially very large motel company shifted the service aspects to the detrimental side, as some entering are not checking in at a hotel, so parking valets didn't ordinarily have to cater to those with luggage, to be staying in the limited number of rooms. More of a major shift than is noticed by the average person.

There are other examples of strategic missteps, in wait.

In the current day, Lake Tahoe generally, and South Shore especially, doesn't have the perspective necessary to create a vision, as they watch the casino industry stumble around. Now even winter weather doesn't cooperate as yet another changing cast of ownership keeps trying to find its way back to "year-round".

It is said that the word "obvious" is actually a conundrum, as what is obvious to one is not to another – that's why communication is needed, and in South Shore's case, a historical perspective to "right-the-ship", in putting the "wind back-in-the-sails" is navigating in a language of the future, if we truly want one.

Vision has the connotation of a long-view, which itself might seem obvious, but the last few decades here have been definitively short-sighted, absent any real marketing message eliciting Lake Tahoe's timeless qualities, with more of a "slot promotional" approach due to its need to cover itself in mostly a "short-term" manner. This contributes to the churning feeling of anxiety in the middle of humanity's impending need

for more serenity and space, not less – that a place like Tahoe can provide if done well.

There are ways to share Tahoe naturally that are not explored, but can result in its reviving a global cachet – what is natural beauty, if not for its ultimate attraction, from however far away on the planet.

Now, the city hopes to engage the public (yet again), but in my own experience, unless they firmly have in mind really listening (being able to both discern, then act on), any learning will follow an already outlying response pattern: “that’ll never happen here”. And its professional’ version, exemplified by a vivid reminder when a city department head was called to answer a question by the City Council, the response was in the same mode as “not happening here” and “our consultant came up with a number of ideas, but our decision was that our people were not ready for that”.

Why then the need to consult if the consultation is rendered moot via existing biases as inadequate?

The same question concerns the engagement of the citizens – and my counsel in past candidacies – the key to success is both “trust and transparency”, and an adequate perspective with which to judge, now still in short supply.

From my long-term perspective, consider this my “speak up”, as inaugural to another 50 years or more.

Depending on queries and response here, a next installment might be: A glass half-empty.

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