

Opinion: Transportation a conundrum in Tahoe

By Joanne Marchetta

This past summer was Lake Tahoe's busiest tourist season in recent memory. With the economy rebounding and major population growth projected for nearby metropolitan areas, this summer is also a harbinger of change. We must be prepared to meet the challenges of increased visitation in the future.

Lake Tahoe has growth caps. But Reno, Sacramento, the Bay Area, and other nearby cities are all expected to continue growing over the next 20 years, putting millions more people within a day's drive of Lake Tahoe. If those projections prove accurate, we can expect to see many more people visiting Lake Tahoe for its world-class scenery and recreation.



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Tourism sustains Lake Tahoe's businesses, economy, and communities. But visitation to our rural area also poses challenges for our environment, limited infrastructure, and public services.

Residents know that every tourism season the highways around Lake Tahoe become congested with vehicles. As hundreds of thousands of people travel here, we see increased demand for access to our favorite recreation sites, creating challenges

for parking, travel, and, ultimately, the well-being of our treasured natural resources.

We must continuously confront the question of how to keep people from loving Lake Tahoe to death, ensuring that it remains healthy while also ensuring it remains available for people to enjoy, particularly since approximately 90 percent of the Tahoe basin is publicly-owned land.

More than a century ago, the federal government decided not to make Lake Tahoe a national park, so we cannot simply put up a gate and limit entry to the Tahoe basin. It is imperative for us to be prepared to meet the challenges of increased tourism, and improving our transportation system is a critical part of that work.

A water quality improvement project Caltrans completed this autumn illustrates some of the competing needs we must balance to improve our highway corridors. This important project reduces erosion and stormwater pollution along seven miles of Highway 89. But the improvements also eliminated some roadside dirt parking areas that people have long used to access popular backcountry skiing on the West Shore.

That loss of parking created an outcry among backcountry skiers. The Tahoe basin offers world-class backcountry skiing, but while the sport has grown, parking and access to popular peaks have become increasingly challenging.

To make up for the lost parking, Caltrans and TRPA approved a project revision to create a 25-by-180 foot paved pullout. California State Parks announced it will plow the visitor center parking lot at D.L. Bliss State Park to provide winter parking. For longer-term solutions, TRPA, skiers, and land management agencies are partnering to have a comprehensive conversation about ways to improve access to skiing locations.

Reducing stormwater pollution is and will remain a top priority because fine sediment from roads and developed areas

is the leading cause of the decline in Lake Tahoe's famed clarity. But we believe that by working together those needs can be better balanced with the needs for summer and winter recreation access.

Fortunately, as we face these challenges, we are again updating our Regional Transportation Plan and taking steps to improve our transportation system.

The 2012 Regional Plan lays out the vision and incentives to make our community centers walkable and bikeable so people can get to work, school, stores, transit centers, and recreation areas without getting in a car. We're seeing progress on that front with new multi-use trails and new sidewalks and bike lanes on roads in our communities.

This summer, El Dorado County completed a shared use trail linking South Lake Tahoe and Meyers. And California recently awarded nearly \$9 million in active transportation grant funding for the South Tahoe Greenway Shared Use Trail, Al Tahoe Boulevard Safety and Mobility Enhancement Project, and Fanny Bridge/State Route 89 Community Revitalization Project – projects that will make our communities more pedestrian and bicycle friendly.

Our ongoing highway corridor planning process is identifying projects and strategies to improve transit service and recreation access around Lake Tahoe so more people can get where they want to go without getting in a car.

We won't solve Lake Tahoe's transportation needs and environmental challenges by building bigger roads to handle more traffic. To maintain quality of life and recreation experiences at Lake Tahoe, we need a comprehensive transportation system with vastly improved travel options: More options to and from the Tahoe Basin, regular transit service between our communities and recreation destinations, and walkable and bikeable town centers. That's just the sort

of system we're working hard to develop. While we are making progress, it is time to double-down and come together around comprehensive funding and transit solutions to manage our growing number of visitors. Please join us in the effort and support transportation and transit funding in your community.

Joanne Marchetta is executive director of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency.