Opinion: Importance of Tahoe Summit grows

By Joanne Marchetta

Lake Tahoe was at a crossroads in 1997. The lake's famous water clarity, once measuring 100 feet, was declining year after year because of stormwater pollution from roads and developed areas and erosion from streams damaged by logging and cattle grazing.



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Tahoe's forests, clear cut during the Comstock era, had grown back unnaturally thick with hazardous fuels and stands of similarly aged trees posing extreme wildfire risk. Communities were struggling with blighted buildings, outdated infrastructure, and limited private investment. And there was no place for bicycles or pedestrians in our towns.

Our region had regulations to protect the lake from new development. But it had no comprehensive restoration program to correct mistakes of the past that were continuing to harm the lake.

Former President Bill Clinton and Vice President Al Gore knew Tahoe was a special place and wanted to help fix that situation at the first-ever Tahoe Summit in 1997. With their lead, we united more than 100 federal, state, local,

nonprofit, and private sector partners in a shared mission to conserve and restore Lake Tahoe through the environmental improvement program.

Since then, EIP partners have prioritized and completed nearly 500 projects to correct the landscape-level environmental problems Tahoe faces.

Projects have restored Tahoe's streams, marshes, and wetlands; built transit facilities and 150 miles of bike and pedestrian routes; upgraded 729 miles of roadways to reduce stormwater pollution; protected our lake from aquatic invasive species; opened 2,770 feet of shoreline for public access; built recreation facilities; and cleared hazardous fuels from tens of thousands of acres of forest around our communities.

We have accomplished far more working together through the EIP than we ever could have done working alone. And today, those yearly declines in Tahoe's famous water clarity have halted and are starting to reverse because two decades ago we made the right decisions and right commitments to work together to conserve and restore our unique mountain lake.

Sen. Harry Reid, D-Nev., organized that first presidential summit in 1997, putting a spotlight on Lake Tahoe and the importance of its conservation and restoration as a national treasure. Reid, who has done so much for the Tahoe region and is leaving office at the end of this year, is also organizing and hosting the 20th annual Tahoe Summit this month. He will be joined by President Obama, who plans to talk about our nation confronting climate change.

Heading into this summit, we must remember that Tahoe's environment is at another important crossroads. Our climate is changing. The State of the Lake report for 2015 found the warmest air and water temperatures ever recorded at Tahoe, and a greater share of our precipitation falling as rain than ever before.

Climate change will pose unprecedented challenges for our lake and forests and mountains, and for our recreation-based economy that depends upon their health. Less snowpack and water storage, escalating tree mortality, a warming lake and environment, and population growth in major metropolitan areas all around Tahoe are just a few of the pressures we will need to confront. Climate change will only amplify the importance of us working together to meet new challenges for Tahoe and beyond in years to come.

We must continue our partnerships to implement the EIP to restore Tahoe's water clarity and protect our forests from the drought and insects ravaging other parts of the Sierra Nevada. We must improve our transit services and bike and pedestrian trails, and improve our permitting processes to accelerate important redevelopment projects in our town centers that will improve our communities, our quality of life, and how we interact with our environment.

TRPA is committed to leading and helping in all of these important endeavors. Fortunately, the framework for collaboration and success is already in place, and every day we reach out to grow added partnerships for the benefit of Lake Tahoe. We have accomplished many things over the past 20 years and have much to be proud of. But our work is not done.

Tahoe is at an important new juncture as we head into another presidential summit. By staying committed to working together we can meet the challenges of the 21st century, make sure we face change with courage, and continue to restore and conserve this beautiful lake and forest for future generations to treasure.

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