

Opinion: Touting success of TRPA Regional Plan

By Jim Lawrence

Conserving and restoring Lake Tahoe's natural environment and revitalizing its communities requires a delicate balancing act. Historically, building consensus around how to strike that balance has been one of the region's greatest difficulties.

Lake Tahoe reached its strongest-ever consensus on that balance with the 2012 Regional Plan and its focus on sustainable redevelopment to restore natural areas, bring legacy development up to modern environmental standards, and create walkable, bikeable, and vibrant town centers.



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This past December marked five years since the adoption of the landmark Regional Plan Update, and all around the Tahoe basin we are seeing signs of progress for the vitality of our communities and the health of Tahoe's treasured environment.

Momentum continues to build. In February, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board will consider approving the Meyers Area Plan and its vision for improving the Meyers community in El Dorado County. If approved, it would be the fifth area plan adopted to implement the Regional Plan.

Plans bring progress

Douglas County has adopted the South Shore Area Plan, which covers the casino core and Lower Kingsbury. The city of South Lake Tahoe has adopted the Tourist Core Area Plan, which extends from Heavenly Village to Ski Run Boulevard, and the Tahoe Valley Area Plan, which is centered around the Y intersection of highways 50 and 89. Placer County has adopted the Tahoe Basin Area Plan, which covers all 72 square miles of the county in the Tahoe basin.

The Regional Plan offers communities with area plans a range of incentives to help revitalize their economies and restore the environment. Five years into the new Regional Plan, nearly one-quarter of the Tahoe basin and two-thirds of its town centers are covered by an area plan, and we are seeing a renaissance with hundreds of millions of dollars of private and public investment in these area plan boundaries.

Redevelopment continues at the Y in South Lake Tahoe with new retail stores and breweries, construction of new facilities at Barton Health, and a new climbing gym set to open this spring. The area is seeing major road improvements on Highway 50 and continued progress on the design and development of the Tahoe Valley Greenbelt, a project that will restore environmentally-sensitive areas, reduce storm water pollution, and provide new green space and shared-use paths for bicyclists and pedestrians.

Edgewood Lodge, which opened last summer in Stateline, is a prime example of how redevelopment can benefit the economy and environment. The project reduced blight, acquiring the development rights needed for the world-class destination resort by demolishing rundown motels. It also created 33,000 square feet of new stream environment zone on the Edgewood Tahoe Golf Course that provides fish and wildlife habitat and reduces the amount of polluted storm water reaching Lake Tahoe.

On the North Shore, the Tahoe City Lodge project approved with the Tahoe Basin Area Plan promises to bring a showcase redevelopment project to Tahoe City. The project will transform a blighted property into an energy-efficient lodge with a mix of hotel rooms and suites, a ground floor restaurant, a rooftop pool and bar, new conference facilities, a new clubhouse for the Tahoe City Golf Course, and parking lot charging stations for electric vehicles. In addition to building the first new North Shore hotel in nearly half a century, the project will reduce coverage at the site by more than 10,000 square feet and restore nearly two acres of sensitive stream environment zone.

Through partnership and collaboration and a growing recognition that the health of the environment and economy are inextricably linked at Lake Tahoe, we are seeing incredible progress around the basin. But we must do more.

From improving forest health to streamlining project permitting, creating a new shoreline plan, and guiding needed transportation and transit service improvements, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is working on strategic initiatives to help accelerate investment and project implementation to meet the Regional Plan goals for a healthier environment and revitalized communities.

Chief among those initiatives is the work we are doing to improve the unique development rights system that was put in place to stop the runaway development that threatened Lake Tahoe decades ago. While that system was effective in stopping runaway development, today it poses major hurdles for the redevelopment projects we need to revitalize our communities and restore sensitive natural areas like meadows and wetlands that play a critical role in Tahoe's health.

Partnering with other public agencies, community members, investors, and environmental groups, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is working to move forward this year with

changes to the development rights system that will help simplify investing in environmentally-beneficial projects at Lake Tahoe.

Lake Tahoe has much to be proud of five years after the adoption of the 2012 Regional Plan, but it has much more to do. By continuing to work together to implement this broadly-supported plan, I am confident we can make even greater strides for the health of our environment and communities in years to come.

Jim Lawrence is chair of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Governing Board.