LTRA allows rejiggering of public lands

By Kathryn Reed

Some of what are now publicly owned lots throughout the basin could one day be privately owned and developed.

While that is not the intent of officials with the Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit, it is allowed under the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act that was approved by Congress last fall and signed by President Barack Obama in December.

The legislation says, “Except in the case of land described in paragraphs (2) and (3), the secretary of agriculture may convey any urban lot within the Lake Tahoe Basin under the administrative jurisdiction of the Forest Service.”

Convey in this sense means to transfer title of property.

“May does not mean we will or that locally we are leaning in that direction,” Heather Noel, spokeswoman for the local U.S. Forest Service office, said in regards to selling the federal land. “They could direct us to look in that direction, but we have not. There would be a lot of discussion before that would happen.”

However, a new administration is in charge; one that has indicated a willingness to get rid of federal land.

If the Forest Service were to sell urban lots, it is more likely to occur in Nevada because the California Tahoe Conservancy is expected to have first dibs at the California ones.

“If it goes from federal domain to a private entity, that is where TRPA codes would prevail,” LTBMU Forest Supervisor Jeff Marsolais told *Lake Tahoe News*.

This means all the rules the bi-state regulatory agency has in place would become relevant.

“The lion’s share of urban lots was Santini-Burton,” Marsolais said. This means they could not be developed.

For ones that don’t fall under Santini-Burton, they must have development rights and a building allocation. Just because someone owns a vacant lot in the basin does not mean they get to build on it.

A large section of the LTRA deals with land transfers, largely between California and the U.S. Forest Service. Some of the land is protected by the 1980 Santini-Burton Act. That act allowed the acquisition of sensitive lands in the basin by the Forest Service and ensured they would not be developed.

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and League to Save Lake Tahoe were integral in wordsmithing the LTRA.

“The broad intent of the language was to preserve these open space lots for the benefit of conservation and environmental protections,” Julie Regan, legislative affairs guru for TRPA, told *Lake Tahoe News.*

The logic behind the land transfers is for each entity to own contiguous property and therefore be managed more efficiently. The thinking is that the California Tahoe Conservancy is better equipped to manage urban lots. The Forest Service wants to get out of owning these parcels that are in neighborhoods. Because there is no similar agency in Nevada, the Forest Service intends to keep its urban lots in the Silver State. In California there are 2,174 or about 3,133 acres’ worth of urban lots, and Nevada there are 1,113 or 1,638 acres.

LTRA identifies 1,936 acres of CTC land and 183 acres of State Parks to be transferred to the USFS. There would be 1,995 acres of USFS land given to those state agencies.

“The public process is important to me in how I approach being a steward of public lands here,” Marsolais said. “I would not move forward without a robust public engagement strategy.”

Still, he said it is not for the Forest Service to say if any aspect of LTRA is good or bad, but instead the agency is to remain neutral and carry out orders from Washington.

While acreage for transfer has been identified, all the LTRA did was give the OK to move forward. The LTBMU, CTC and State Parks need to go through their respective processes before it’s a done deal.

The LTRA says this exchange will “not result in any significant changes in the uses of the land; and (will) be subject to the condition that the applicable deed include such terms, restrictions, covenants, conditions, and reservations as the secretary determines necessary.”

In other words, if the land couldn’t be developed before, it can’t be in the future either. However, if there are development rights associated with that property, they go with the property.

“We will be meeting with the USFS soon to discuss options for moving forward. At this point, however, there is no funding or staff dedicated to process thousands of changes of ownership, or for the Conservancy to manage additional lands. LTRA authorizes $2 million to help facilitate the transfer, but those funds have not been appropriated,” Patrick Wright, CTC executive director, told *Lake Tahoe News.* “As to the urban lots we would receive, virtually all are deed restricted for environmental purposes, and LTRA clearly states that the transfers are subject to those restrictions, that no changes in uses can be allowed – so they could not be developed, and that their development rights, if any, cannot be used to facilitate development elsewhere.”

People, particularly in South Lake Tahoe, are skeptical of

land transfers after the CTC acquired what was the old drive-in from the city. It is now a mega-home whose only purpose is to be a vacation home rental. Some fear when the CTC owns the current USFS land it will become part of the state agency's asset lands management program – which allows the state to sell the public land and to use that money to keep the agency solvent.

That is why language in the LTRA says, "If a parcel of land transferred under paragraph (2) or (3) is used in a manner that is inconsistent with the use described for the parcel of land in paragraph (2) or (3), respectively, the parcel of land, shall, at the discretion of the secretary, revert to the United States."

Even so, there remains the real possibility some current public land could one day be privately owned.

Why the Squaw Valley Palisades are flat



A tunnel to the right is about 8-feet high and one-quarter mile long. Photo/Squaw Valley

By Abby Stevens, Moonshine Ink

Once you get to the top of the Palisades at Squaw Valley, you might wonder why the terrain becomes a perfectly flat area, about the size of a football field – but then again, maybe you are just thinking about which epic line to take.

The top of the Palisades, or geographically Squaw Peak, is accessible after a short hike from the Siberia chair lift and widely known for access to a set of six chutes. There are a surprisingly few records on how the set of cliffs was flattened.

In 1936, the Federal Aviation Administration designed a short-range navigation system called Omni Directional Radio Range (VOR) in which radio signals from a network of fixed ground radio beacons are transmitted to aircrafts and allow pilots to determine their location in the skies. By 1946 the system was deployed and VOR became the standard air navigational system in the world used by both commercial and general aviation, according to Hardy Bullock, director of Aviation & Community Services at the Truckee Tahoe Airport. At 9,000 feet, Squaw Peak was the perfect place to put towers to direct airplanes to Truckee, the Bay Area, down toward Southern California, or up toward the Pacific Northwest – the only issue was the peak wasn’t flat enough for the infrastructure.

Read the whole story

Demand for lithium a potential boon for Nevada



The Chemetall Foote Lithium Operation in Clayton Valley, a dry lake bed in Esmeralda County. Photo/Doc Searls

By Ben Botkin, Las Vegas Review-Journal

Deep within the bowels of Nevada, a mineral found in the underground brines represents a potential growth industry for the Silver State.

Lithium, used in car batteries, ceramics and even anti-depressant medications, is mined in one place in the U.S.: Nevada.

State mining regulators are working on Assembly Bill 52, which would create a framework for lithium mining and exploration in Nevada. State officials say it would add clarity to a system that requires explorers to rely on water well regulations and waivers to sample brines for lithium from drilled wells.

Read the whole story

SLT goal: Embrace Tahoe as national treasure

By Kathryn Reed

Unhook preconceived ideas. Steer rather than row. Visioning is to be unfettered and unconstrained.

Those were the instructions-sentiments of Ted Gaebler, author of “Reinventing Government” and a retired city manager who spent 50 years in local government. He facilitated the Feb. 25 South Lake Tahoe strategic plan meeting at Inn by the Lake. In addition to the five council members, 15 key staff were in attendance at the daylong session.

“Strategic planning is a process that a group goes through to allow people, not at the top necessarily, to take advantage of an unintentional opportunity or respond to an unanticipated crisis,” Gaebler said.

His goal was to get these 20 leaders to realize they can stop delivering some services and let the private sector do it, while at the same time the city can get into new businesses as long it isn’t already served by the private sector.

With long term goals, it means the ability to capitalize on them when the opportunity presents itself.

Much of the wall space in the meeting room was filled with informative posters about the city – a map outlining what lands are publicly owned, investment projects, financial trends, completed and future projects (Lakeview Commons, Regan

Beach, Sierra Tract erosion control, playfields), local agency partners, legacy action plan, and the community identity via other groups.



Ted Gaebler leads South Lake Tahoe officials Feb. 25 in a strategic planning session. Photo/Kathryn Reed

Sitting around four tables, individually they spent 10 minutes writing what they envision for the community – not just city government – by 2030. In other words, what can be accomplished in the next baker's dozen decade. Then at their tables they consolidated the thoughts. And from there they were to develop a composite to represent the entire room. Then they went through a similar process, only they shuffled the seating.

With Lake Tahoe across the street, and the drapes pulled back to see that bowl of blue shimmering, it was easy to capitalize on what makes this place special and unique. Focusing on the area being a global or national treasure resonated with everyone.

Tangibles rising to the top were – improving the built environment and better public transit. Some want to take the

dilapidated buildings and either get rid of them entirely or rehab them into something functional and profitable. With transit, a monorail and cross lake ferry were mentioned, as well as bike-pedestrian paths that reach areas people want to go.

If South Lake Tahoe is a global treasure, then it needs to be treated like one. That has not happened based on how the infrastructure looks and functions. Maintenance concerns for years were not considered and it shows.

Going forward, though, the sentiment will be: “We will reflect the national treasure in which we live.”

With saying “we” instead of “the city” the idea is this can be taken to agency partners to have them embrace the same vision.

Other ideas that many embraced included:

· Being able to redevelop waterfront areas for more public access.

· Events center on California side, even if it’s not in the city limits. And therefore, have more year-round events.

· Face-lift for Highway 50.

· Need new economy that works; to be part of the 22nd century in the 21st. This new economy will fund the projects they envision.

· Having values to get to the vision.

· Getting fiber optics in place to handle high-speed Internet and the growing demand for all things technological.

Another exercise was working on one- and five-year visions. From the four tables, consensus was to find a funding source for roads, perhaps via raising sales tax.

Other ideas included removing blighted hotels, enforce the

sign ordinance, break ground on the recreation center, new communications system for public safety, update fleet, resolve 56-acre ownership-management with El Dorado County, solve vacation home rental issue, build Greenway bikeway, and define site for events center.

At the end of the day there was conversation about what is going on in town and thoughts from the **Feb. 14 preplanning session**:

· A consultant is working with Harrison Avenue property owners regarding parking. The city's redevelopment agency owns three lots on Riverside Avenue that could potentially be paved over if someone were to buy them from what is now the Successor Agency. However, there is actually someone interested in those lots for housing.

· Regarding the collapsed building at Harrison Avenue, the owner intends to rebuild, but what and how remains to be determined.

· Parking lots for trailer parking will have to be used just for that now that the lake is up and the ramp at Lakeview Commons can be used.

· A desire to help the two South Shore chambers of commerce to play nice together.

· Talk of how affordable housing is an issue for a variety of reasons, from commodities to lack of supply.

· Tahoe Regional Planning Agency commodities were discussed.

· A suggestion made to have more workshops to hash out specific topics.

From here a business plan will be developed by staff that the council will adopt this spring.

Tahoe’s rising level a boon for downstream users

By Benjamin Spillman, Reno Gazette-Journal

Reno is experiencing its wettest winter on record and Lake Tahoe-area ski resorts anticipate Fourth of July skiing and snowboarding.

Lake Tahoe is likely to hit its storage limit for the first time since 2006. And that means water from the largest alpine lake in North America will spill into the Truckee River for years to come.

“After Tahoe fills it is good for three years,” said Chad Blanchard, the federal water master in Reno. “We could have unprecedented dry (weather) and it still ends up being two years.”

With seven months of the water year remaining, Reno has recorded 12.74 inches of precipitation. The old mark for a 12-month water season was 12.72 from Oct. 1, 1982, to Sept. 30, 1983. Since Oct. 1, Tahoe City has seen 56.38 inches of precipitation in the form of rain or snow water equivalent. That beats the previous record for October through February, set in 1969, by more than 10 inches. Even if it doesn’t rain or snow before the end of March, it would beat the October to March record, set in 1982, by two inches.

Read the whole story

Women’s World Cup slides into Squaw

By Susan Wood

The best of the best in the world of skiing will descend on the home of the 1960 Winter Games in Lake Tahoe next month, with Squaw Valley set to host the sport’s premier event.

The top women’s alpine ski racers in the world are preparing for the Audi FIS Women’s World Cup giant slalom and slalom races along with other seasoned competitors for the Toyota ProAm Ski Challenge to round out the weekend’s festivities slated for March 10-12.

It’s difficult to gauge who will win the most from the endeavor.



“It’s with pride we bring World Cup skiing back to Tahoe.” — **Andy Wirth**, Squaw Valley CEO

Beyond California’s ski industry association, Squaw’s celebrity ambassador, and Truckee’s city officials, no one could be giddier with excitement than the ski resort’s head honcho Andy Wirth.

Squaw’s chief executive officer began the quest to host the event about three years ago with Olympic ski racer Julia Mancuso, whose home resort is Squaw.

Even an emboldened Wirth admitted to being skeptical because the FIS calendar is “tightly held.” Thankfully, he knew the right people and made it happen with Mancuso’s help.

It was like the spirit of Alex Cushing was smiling down.

“It’s with pride we bring World Cup skiing back to Tahoe. World Cup is very unique – it is to skiing what the Masters is to golf. And this is the last World Cup for women before the finals,” Wirth told *Lake Tahoe News.* The finals are set in Aspen March 13-19.

Wirth noted the event has a major purpose for him that goes beyond bringing an obvious enhanced image of Squaw Valley to the world.

“We want to inspire the next generation or two of ski racers from this mountain that come out to ski Lake Tahoe. We’re thrilled to host this,” the skiing enthusiast said, adding the move “has nothing to do with television exposure.”

“When we watch Mikaela (Shiffrin) and Julia come through that finish line – that makes it real,” Wirth said. Shiffrin is a favorite, along the racing circuit with Vail Resort’s Olympic medalist Lindsey Vonn and Mancuso.

The race route for GS and slalom will be set up off the Red Dog run, “the exact same track of the 1960 Olympics with a different gate and different turns,” Wirth said.

Wirth beefed up workers to manage the event with 2,500 paid staff and volunteers.

He expects his season passholders won’t be impacted as most of the mountain will be open for business – much the same way Wirth’s former resort Whistler was when it hosted the Winter Olympics in 2010.

Squaw’s chief anticipates more than 15,000 spectators in two days.



Red Dog will be reserved for World Cup athletes March 10-11. Photo/LTN file

An economic boost for region?

That's like music to the ears of Truckee Town Manager Tony Lashbrook, who expects a residual economic boost in the city on that weekend.

"We look forward to it. We're expecting downtown to be very busy. The hotels should be full. We're treating it like a holiday weekend. We may have traffic issues on (Highway) 89 and (Interstate) 80, but we have a heads up on that," Lashbrook told *LTN*. "But we have great snow, that's so nice to showcase."

Agreed says California Ski Industry Association officials.

"We are having an amazing season here in California, so it's a great time for this event to make its way west," association Executive Director Michael Reitzell told *Lake Tahoe News.*

He sees the same long-term benefit that Wirth does in getting the ski racers of tomorrow jazzed about someday joining the ski team – perhaps to compete in the World Cup.

Reitzell used Squaw Valley's own Travis Ganong as an example of a resort-bred men's downhiller who competes and wins in races.

"He, along with the fantastic women who will race at Squaw Valley in March, show every one of those young racers that reaching the top from California is possible," he said.

To be what you want to be

Just ask Squaw's own ambassador – Olympic gold medal freestyle skier and World Cup champion in mogul skiing Jonny Moseley.

The homegrown skier, who is considered one of the most influential skiers of all time, knows the dream and lived it. He single-handedly changed the sport of freestyle skiing – albeit quite different than the downhill discipline. Nonetheless, like Mancuso, Moseley honed his skills at Squaw Valley and believes Wirth is the right man to put on an event of this magnitude.

"As long as there's alpine skiing, people have wanted to go. It's World Cup or nothing," Moseley told *Lake Tahoe News*. "It's going to be a great event and provide income to the economy. The whole Tahoe area has Olympic high-end racers."

The last time World Cup was staged here was 1971.

Moseley offered a word of advice to the World Cup competitors.

"Keep in mind, I'm a freestyle skier. But from my general bank of knowledge in what I've seen on Red Dog is it has off camber features with many twists," he said as a quasi-skier scholar.

Moseley added the run makes for an interesting race considering it starts from the top of the chairlift.

The surface will command slick conditions, meaning cold enough temperatures to "impregnate water into the surface and freeze overnight," he said. The ski resort waters down the run before

a race to give it that slick feel.

“If we get an atmospheric river right before or throughout – that might be a problem,” he said of the latest meteorology term describing constant wet storms.

But it can’t be all serious work and no play. There are the parties. And then there are the sideshows.

Moseley and his Olympic gold medalist counterpart on the downhill side, Daron Rahlves – who retired a few years ago from sanctioned competition, plan to race after the World Cup races.

It’s like the battle of the ski legends, Olympic style.



Squaw Valley’s legend will grow with a new generation witnessing its iconic steeps. Photo/LTN file

Looking beyond

The whole World Cup series of events may also serve another long-standing purpose.

“Squaw getting the World Cup is huge news for our region in a

variety of ways. It’s a tremendous venue in that the Tahoe region continues to harbor the dream of bringing the Olympics to Lake Tahoe (again),” former Nevada Lt. Gov. Brian Krolicki told *LTN* from Washington, D.C., by phone.

Krolicki, who also hails from Tahoe, serves as the chairman on the commission to deliver the Winter Games to the Reno-Tahoe region.

But timing is everything.

Since connected to the Olympic system, Krolicki added his group respects taking a backseat for the U.S. Olympic Committee with the Summer Games slated for 2024. Host countries don’t often get the Games back to back, but that doesn’t mean the idea has no chance of materializing.

Baby steps.

“For now, we’ll just tuck it away and hope there’s a way to host another Olympics. The World Cup showcases our region and infrastructure. This could be a piece of the puzzle as we go forward,” Krolicki said. “To have the world’s elite in Tahoe is an important part of the story going forward.”

Why it’s so wet in California



So much snow has Heavenly extending its ski season to the end of April. Photo Copyright 2017 Carolyn E. Wright

By Paul Rogers, San Jose Mercury News

Why is it raining so much this year in California. In a typical year, California has between 10 to 15 “atmospheric river” storms – the fire hoses that rampage in from Hawaii and account for up to 50 percent of the state’s annual rainfall – and nearly all of its floods. But since the rainy season began on Oct. 1, there already have been 30. And there are two months of winter to go.

“We are well beyond double what is normal,” said Marty Ralph, director of the Center for Western Weather and Water Extremes at UC San Diego.

Ralph, one of the nation’s experts on atmospheric rivers – which are often called Pineapple Express storms when they come from the tropics – calculated the big boost in atmospheric river storms last week for the state Department of Water

Resources. He found that from Oct. 1 to Feb. 16, there was an average of one atmospheric river storm every 4.6 days that made landfall in California. Nine of them were of strong or extreme strength.

Read the whole story

Heller: Town hall can’t have booing

By Seth A. Richardson, Reno Gazette-Journal

Sen. Dean Heller and Rep. Mark Amodei didn’t mean to have a town hall meeting on Wednesday during a Carson City event, but it quickly turned into one.

What was slated as a routine luncheon in front of the Carson City Chamber of Commerce with the two Republicans quickly turned into an impromptu forum. Protesters, who had to pay the admission price to get in, quickly started yelling, “Town hall meeting!” wanting Heller and Amodei to schedule in-district meetings for constituents. A group could also be heard from outside the event.

Groups have been putting pressure on Heller – as well as other Republicans nationwide – to hold town halls. Several have, often getting shouted out of their own meeting over policies proposed by Republican President Trump.

Read the whole story

Housing play books don’t have all the answers

Publisher’s note: ***This is one in a series of stories about affordable housing in the Lake Tahoe-Truckee region. All articles may be accessed via the home page under Special Projects, 2017 Affordable Housing.***

By Joann Eisenbrandt

Reviewing South Lake Tahoe’s housing elements chronologically is like taking a close-up look at the city in a mirror every few years. Sometimes, the changes are positive, other times, not so much. As the city has aged, some wrinkles have just gotten deeper and deeper. One of the most prominent of these is the continued inability of low- and middle-income residents to find quality, affordable housing in the same location where they work.



As far back as 1988, the affordable housing shortfall for the city’s lowest wage earners was already evident. The 1988 housing element was an update of its 1980 predecessor. It found that due to constraints outside the city’s control, “… there has not been much progress toward solving the housing problems which exist in the city.” It called the housing supply situation “critical”—a term still being used to describe it in 2017.

The issues it identified are the same ones that subsequent housing elements have focused on. Of the city’s 13,891 housing

units, only 9,385 were available to permanent residents. City planners noted that, “More and more homeowners are converting their homes into vacation rentals because of the profit gain involved. This process is fast reducing potential rental stock for local permanent residents.” In 1987, there were approximately 1,028 registered vacation rentals within the City of South Lake Tahoe. This was a 37 percent increase over the previous five years.

The condition of the city’s housing stock was declining. Over half of the city’s housing units were more than 20 years old. Rents and home prices were rising. “A serious overpayment situation (in relation to income) exists among renter and owner households,” the document stated. Impacts were greatest on the elderly, the unemployed and “low-wage casino and service employees.” “Overpayment” was defined as housing that exceeded 25 percent of total income.

Only two subsidized housing projects existed, Chateau Bijou and Sierra Gardens, but the demand for more was already clearly there. Both had a zero vacancy rate and a waiting period of six to eight months. Sixty-one percent of city residents rented rather than owned. The city housed many residents who worked across the state line. Casinos were expanding, and, “This situation has increased the burden on the Nevada counties to bear their fair share of housing for the employees which the gaming industry produces.”

Redevelopment was just in its formative stages. It had its own affordable housing requirements and was expected to help with the affordable housing issue. However, the lawsuits over the TRPA Regional Plan had not yet been resolved and the sewer plant was at capacity. There would be no more residential allocations from TRPA until it was expanded.

The housing element looked to the Renaissance 90 Committee, a public/private city-directed partnership, to provide updated information on city issues, including affordable housing. It

was just one of many studies conducted by the city, hired consultants or community groups dealing with the affordable housing issue over the years.



"We have to look at existing rules and work together with TRPA."

-- South Lake Tahoe City Councilman Tom Davis

Where the rubber hits the road

In their 2012 Housing Element Update Guidance document, the California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD), says, "An effective housing element provides the necessary conditions to support the development and the preservation of an adequate supply of housing, including housing affordable to seniors, families and workers."

Kevin Fabino has been the city's Development Services Director since May 2016. He told *Lake Tahoe News*, "I would really caution the community about using the housing element as a document to base future housing decisions on. It is a requirement of law. It doesn't really address what's going on in our community." He adds, "The purpose of the housing element is to identify what the need is, and that comes from the Sacramento Area Council of Governments. That's not the city's perception of what the real need may be. The housing element makes that very clear. It's our obligation to show that we can fulfill that obligation. But there are really two

things going on: what the housing element requires and what's really going on in our world."

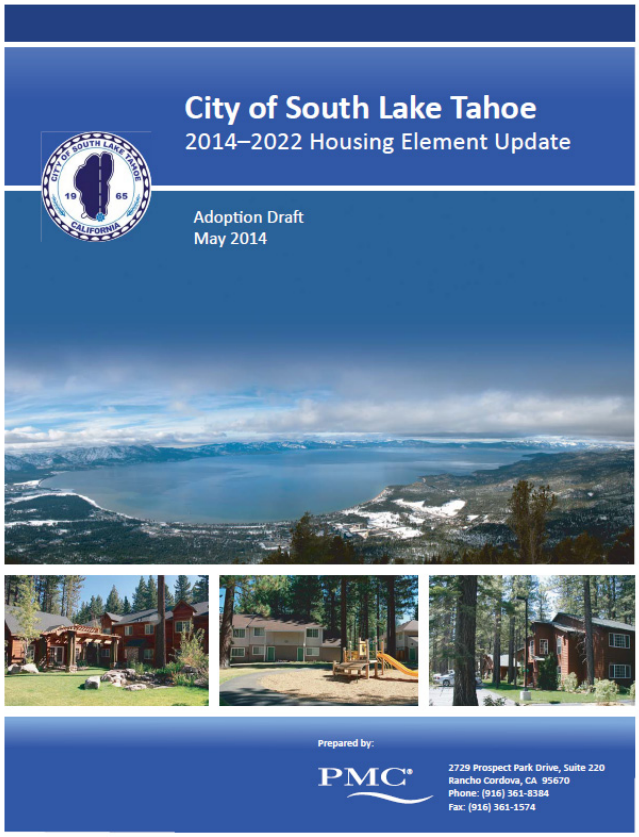
Fabino calls the Regional Housing Needs Allocation numbers that the Sacramento Area Council of Governments gets from the state, "an exercise in theory, not practicality." He points to the fact that in the 2008 housing element, the city was required to provide 18 housing units dispersed between very low-, extremely-low and moderate-income levels. "What was actually produced in that timeframe was 50 units. Did the 50 units provided satisfy the real need in the community? No." He hopes that in the future there is a, "more articulate conversation about those levels."

Beyond this, there remain the constraints to the construction or rehabilitation of affordable housing outside the city's control. *Lake Tahoe News* asked all five city councilmembers for their views on how well the city has implemented its housing element. Only Councilmembers Tom Davis and Wendy David responded.

"We need multi-family homes. We need TRPA to loosen up," Davis said of the regulatory constraints. "We need to focus on where the need is greatest. We need to know how much land is actually available. We have to look at existing rules and work together with TRPA." Davis pointed to South Tahoe Public Utility District's reduction in sewer hook-up costs and suggested that if all the agencies in the basin reduced their fees for a trial four-year period and TRPA "backed away" on land coverage, deed-restricted affordable housing would have enough financial incentives to be attractive to developers. But, he concluded, "It's going to be a long journey."

David believes the city has been "active and proactive in several ways regarding housing, noting that 350 affordable housing units have been built. She said the city is addressing substandard housing issues in the motels where many residents live. "Are these the preferred living quarters for our

residents?" she asked. "No. But if people are going to live there, we have an obligation to have codes that address their needs." David is referring to the Single Room Occupancy Ordinance and program. More than 40 motels are currently signed up for the program which sets standards and provides for inspections. She believes the city needs to continue to, "be cognizant of our community, their voices and experiences as well as our housing availability and the impact it has on us socially and economically."



A legal and philosophical document

California law requires jurisdictions create long-range general plans that look several decades into the future and outline how that particular area is going to develop and change. The housing element is one of the seven mandated parts of such local general plans.

While a housing element is a technical response to the state's mandate, it is also a vital part of that jurisdiction's vision of what it is and what it hopes to be in the future. As the

California Department of Housing and Community Development (HCD) explains, “While the housing element must address specific state statutory requirements, including the local jurisdictions’ fair share of the regional housing need, it is ultimately a local plan and should reflect the vision and priorities of the community.”

The legal dimension

Cities are required by the state to meet their “fair share” of the projected regional housing need. State housing policy relies on individual jurisdictions to plan effectively to meet this need. HCD reviews housing elements and then certifies them for compliance with state housing regulations.

This share of regional housing is a numerical calculation broken down by income level from very low to above moderate. The Sacramento Area Council of Governments (SACOG) calculates overall housing needs in a six-county region, including South Lake Tahoe, through a detailed statistical process using information from the California Department of Finance and other sources. It then tells each jurisdiction precisely how many housing units for each income level they must plan for over the span of their current housing element. This is called the Regional Housing Needs Allocation (RHNA).

Jurisdictions must update their housing elements periodically to show they are meeting these requirements. Income categories, as defined by state law are: very low income (less than 50 percent of median family income (MFI); low income (50 to 80 percent MFI); moderate income (80 to 120 percent MFI); and above moderate income (above 120 percent MFI). The city must show it can provide sufficient land and zoning capacity to meet projected housing unit needs in each of these income categories.

There is one important distinction. While the city must show it has the land capacity for these units to be built, it is

not responsible for their actual construction. South Lake Tahoe's current housing element was updated in May 2014 and covers the planning period of Jan. 1, 2013, through Oct. 31, 2021. The RHNA, the total number of housing units the city has to plan to accommodate, is 336; 155 are for affordable to moderate-income households and below, including 27 extremely-low income units, 27 very-low income units, 38 low-income units and 63 moderate-income units. Also included are 181 above-moderate income units.

The philosophical side

The statistical side of housing elements shows how actual circumstances "on the ground" are changing, either for the better or for the worse. But there is that other component of housing elements that tells what the city's housing priorities are and what, in an ideal world, it plans to do to see them become reality.

"Adequate housing is essential to the viability of the community and its residents," the city's 1988 housing element affirmed. "Each and every individual, regardless of race, creed, color, sex, age, handicap, or income, should have the opportunity to have access to adequate housing. The city will support and encourage adequate housing in the community."

In its September 2003 housing element, the city said it would, "Place high importance on preservation of a local community in South Lake Tahoe rather than just having a resort area of part-time second homes. Provide housing options so that people who work in the community can choose to live here and preserve the ability for children to afford housing in the community where they grow up."

This ability of residents of low- and moderate-incomes to continue to live in South Lake Tahoe has become an issue of greater and greater concern and discussion as the years have progressed.



Affordable housing stock in South Lake Tahoe is lacking. Photo/LTN

The guts of the matter

Each housing element has the same basic parts. It reviews the immediately prior one to see what has worked and what hasn't—what policies have been implemented and what goals have been reached. It then does a Needs Assessment to get an accurate picture of current housing needs. This includes an inventory of existing housing stock and its condition and the demographics of the city's residents. It does a resource inventory that shows what land is available for residential construction, what public services are available and what city, state, county and federal housing programs and funding mechanisms exist. These analyses generates table after table of statistics measuring things like the percentage of rental- versus owner-occupied dwellings, the age and ethnic breakdown of residents, median incomes, residents' employment by industry, median housing sales prices, and the parcel size and distribution of land.

It also looks at the current constraints on the city's ability to meet its affordable housing numbers. These factors include governmental constraints such as city, county, state or Tahoe

Regional Planning Agency land use regulations and fees, as well as non-governmental constraints such as changes in the national economy, the real estate market, prevailing wage scales, and the physical and topographical challenges of Lake Tahoe itself.

A look in the mirror

The November 1992 housing element noted that to reach its goal of providing affordable housing for low- and moderate-income residents, the city had set aside 30 percent of the residential allocations it received from TRPA in 1990 and 1991 for multi-family housing. From these 55 allocations, five moderate-income duplexes and one triplex were constructed but, "to this date there have been no affordable housing projects completed." It found that since 1975, environmental restrictions had precluded construction of multi-family housing and raised development costs so high that predominantly upper-income housing had been built.

It also found that, "South Lake Tahoe has never had an articulated housing policy." The failure to meet its affordable housing goals and objectives was partly because the city had no one individual or department dedicated to housing issues. The recent hiring of a housing coordinator was expected to help.

It also contained a blizzard of technical analyses, statistics and tables. The average home price had risen from $87,000 in 1980 to $133,603 in 1992, according to Board of Realtors' statistics. Thirty-two percent of homeowners and 49 percent of renters were still "overpaying" for housing, now defined as total housing costs over 30 percent of total income. The only subsidized housing in the city was still at Chateau Bijou and Sierra Gardens. Overcrowding in existing units continued to be a problem as was an increase in illegal housing units.

It discussed homelessness and the growing use of low-end motel

rooms as affordable housing. This was born from the difference between perceptions of Tahoe as a summer and winter paradise and the realities of living there. Many, it said, "… arrive with guaranteed jobs at the casinos, but are surprised at the high cost of rents compared to the low wages they receive." Unable to afford upfront rental and utility deposits, they look to motel rooms as an alternative. However, in summer when rents are raised or the focus is on tourists, many are left homeless.



Vacation home rentals have been a documented concern in the city for years. Photo/LTN

More déjà vu views

The city's housing element was subsequently updated in 1999, 2003, and 2008. The "philosophical environment" continued to

play a big role in how much affordable housing was actually created. The city's 1999 General Plan, of which the housing element was a part, felt it was important to, "provide the background from which the General Plan was developed." It did this by beginning with excerpts from TRPA's 1996 evaluation of the Tahoe basin. "The Tahoe Region was once a place of inestimable beauty … the progress of modern life has diminished the unique values that make the Tahoe region so extraordinary … ironically, the millions who enjoy the area simultaneously endanger it with their very presence."

The 2003 housing element pointed to the growing trend of local low- and middle-income employees buying homes or renting in the Carson Valley and commuting. This could lead to two things. "The community could become more economically divided, with affluent and working poor residents but a shrinking middle class." And the possibility that, "… within 10 years most people who work in South Lake Tahoe will not be living here."

At the time of the city's 2008 housing element update, TRPA was in the process of updating its own Regional Plan. The city was involved in this process and, "continuously voiced the need to balance the housing needs of local residents with the need to protect and improve the clarity of Lake Tahoe."

Many workers still resided in older motel rooms; approximately 1,290 housing units were being used as vacation rentals; 62 percent of the estimated 12,000 employees in the Tahoe basin portion of Douglas County lived in South Lake Tahoe. The city was still predominantly white at 75.7 percent, but this was a significant drop from 92.2 percent in 1988. Young families continued to move down the hill. This led to declining school enrollment and the closure of Al Tahoe Elementary and Meyers Elementary schools in 2004. Fifty-seven percent of occupied housing units were rentals.

There were still no homeless shelters in the city. "Most of

the current homeless population," the city found, "is often using motel rooms or camping for their permanent residence." Governmental services for the homeless in South Lake Tahoe were provided by El Dorado County. The only affordable housing development for seniors was Tahoe Senior Plaza.

The relatively new term, "workforce housing" had emerged. The 2008 housing element defined it as housing affordable to working households who don't qualify for publicly subsidized housing but also can't afford market-rate housing in the community. Middle-income members of the community like police officers, teachers, firefighters and nurses were also experiencing housing issues. The 2007 median home price in South Lake Tahoe was $425,000, but their "affordability" range was closer to $200,000. Many chose commuting from the Carson Valley or beyond.

The housing element today

The 2014 document finds the same "general disparity" between wages and the cost of housing in South Lake Tahoe. Renters occupy 61.1 percent of housing units. Rents continue to increase as does overcrowding in multi-unit rental complexes. South Lake Tahoe continues "to bear the brunt" of housing other jurisdictions' low-income employees. Only a "limited number" of the area's largest service-industry employers offer housing or housing assistance to their seasonal or permanent employees.

The housing element includes information from TRPA's 1997 "Affordable Housing Needs Assessment Final 'Fair Share' Report." It was created to addresses the general assumption that some jurisdictions at the lake housed employees that worked elsewhere. TRPA's housing sub-element encouraged local governments to, "assume their fair share of the responsibility to provide lower and very low income housing," but never quantified what that was.

The “Fair Share” report states that, “… each jurisdiction should assume responsibility for all of its low and very low income households created by their employment opportunities.” After data gathering and statistical analysis, it divided jurisdictions’ “fair shares” this way: South Lake Tahoe, 33 percent; Douglas County, 36 percent; El Dorado County, 2 percent; Placer County 11 percent; and Washoe County, 18 percent. It was a suggestion, not a mandate like the state’s RHNA numbers. It recognized that land availability and costs, environmental constraints and the real estate market would affect how realistic its projections were.

“There is a vast need for affordable housing independent of the fair share issue,” it acknowledged. “Unfortunately, at this time, more impediments seem to exist than incentives.” It also recognized that TRPA’s own regulations on land use, coverage, height restrictions and density limits were part of the impediments. “Each of these hinders, to some extent, affordable housing construction due to increased costs of projects.”

The 2014 housing element also discusses the phenomenon of “hot bedding. “This is where people working different shifts live in the same weekly motel room, but at different times of the day. Of motel living, the housing element says, “However, for many motel residents, motel living is a lifestyle choice. These residents may prefer to live in motels because of amenities such as maid service and the ease of paying a single bill each month.”

It notes that TRPA completed the update to its Regional Plan in 2012 and made changes affecting affordable housing by allowing mixed-use development, permitting 70 percent coverage in town and regional centers, and allowing transfer bonuses for residential transfers into town or regional centers. It also allowed jurisdictions to complete area plans to replace existing community plans and plan area statements. Still, the maximum densities allowed leave the city with, “limited sites

where development at densities conducive to feasible housing projects can occur."

Additionally, the dissolution of redevelopment agencies by Gov. Jerry Brown in 2011 eliminated this funding mechanism for future affordable housing and infrastructure development.

An increase in TRPA housing allocations, it finds, "does not necessarily correlate with ensuring that housing will be available to local residents of all income levels to purchase or rent." It found that the Tahoe basin had, "an ample supply of housing stock—plenty to serve the regional population" but it was being used inefficiently.

One example is the use of motel rooms as affordable housing. "While some people allege that vacation home rentals 'cut into' the demand and market for motel rooms … many of the motels providing housing for some area residents would never appeal to the visitor market without substantial rehabilitation/investment." At their 2014 level of use, vacation rentals were, "not considered by the City Council to be a constraint to providing, maintaining, and improving housing for people of all income levels in South Lake Tahoe."

The city has recently made changes to its Vacation Rental Ordinance to increase enforcement and prohibit the future use of multi-unit complexes as vacation rentals. It is currently conducting a study to determine the citywide effects of vacation rentals.

The 2014 housing element also found that the mandated RHNA housing numbers are, "not an accurate assessment of the actual needs of the city's residents by income group." SACOG's methodology is based on assumptions true in other jurisdictions, but not true for the Tahoe basin. The allocation, "underestimates the actual needs of city residents."

The elephant in the housing element

The city's 2014 housing element explains, "Development is a costly venture in the Lake Tahoe Basin." There are the city's own land use regulations and fees, but on top of that is the additional layer of TRPA regulations. The effect of these regulations has been a topic of concern in all the city's housing elements.

Tom Lotshaw, TRPA spokesman, told *Lake Tahoe News*, "First, we don't think it's a matter of TRPA's code and regulations being superior or inferior to the local governments and their housing elements. TRPA code is more regionally oriented in comparison to the details offered in the local government code. TRPA code and regulations are trying to facilitate implementation of the local governments' housing elements, along with meeting TRPA's many other objectives, such as environmental conservation and restoration and protection of the lake …. "

Lotshaw added that over time TRPA has "created various incentives for affordable and moderate workforce housing to help local governments meet needs identified in their housing elements." The housing chapter in TRPA's 2012 Regional Plan urges the use of area plans like the Tahoe Valley Area Plan. He listed some of TRPA's incentives including no residential allocation needed for affordable housing projects, no-cost bonus units available for multi-family affordable housing projects, and a 25 percent increase in allowable density for multi-family affordable housing projects.

TRPA's current strategic initiative on development rights will, "look at improving policies associated with development rights and evaluate different alternatives for their ability to support a range of housing opportunities and workforce housing …." They are also working on a "welcome mat" initiative to streamline the permitting process. Lotshaw added that many of the available TRPA housing incentives are "only rarely being used. That suggests there are more systematic obstacles affecting the construction of affordable housing at

Lake Tahoe."

The million-dollar question

Fabino commended TRPA for looking at the development rights issue but felt it wasn't the only thing at play here. When asked by *Lake Tahoe News* why the affordable housing issue in South Lake Tahoe remains unsolved today, he responded, "That's the million-dollar question." Answering it, he believes, requires a realization of the central role the marketplace plays. "When we are talking about creating affordable housing we come back to the same fundamental question that we have to ask when attracting businesses or industry here. It always comes back to the cost. It's all about driving the market."

Atmospheric rivers wreak havoc around the globe



Lake Valley firefighters this week help a Meyers resident with a flooding issue.

Photo/LVFPD

By Christopher Joyce, NPR

“Atmospheric river” is a colorful term for a sinuous plume of moisture that travels up from the tropics – a single plume can carry more water than the Mississippi River at its mouth. But new research shows that atmospheric rivers are also among the most damaging weather systems around.

The atmospheric rivers that soaked California this winter did some good – they ended an epic drought in the state.

“This has been a very active winter, atmospheric river-wise,” reports Jeff Zimmerman of the National Weather Service. “We’ve probably had 10 or more … this winter.” The norm is just a few; being a La Nina year, with cooler water in the eastern Pacific, was part of the reason for the abundance.

Read the whole story