

Guest column: TRPA's new refrain — build baby build

By Rochelle Nason
Special to the Bonanza

Tahoe is on the verge of changes that will affect it for generations to come. The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency is deciding the ground rules for how to develop Tahoe for the next 20 years. The most disturbing proposal is to require taller buildings and higher density on more than 800 acres across the lake, in the name of “smart growth.”

Yes, get ready for TRPA's new refrain: “Build baby build.”

Under the new plan, Tahoe could become unrecognizable to so many who love it: dozens of towering new resorts and subdivisions, more traffic, more pavement, more commercial space, and more luxury timeshares and condos.

TRPA accuses doubters of a “do nothing” approach. Let's be real: We all want walkable, bikeable and accessible communities. We all want less traffic. We all seek to eliminate blight and nurture vibrant communities with beautiful views. Responsible redevelopment can be a true win-win for everyone.

However, we do not have to urbanize Lake Tahoe to achieve those goals. In California and Nevada, there are many communities with compact, two-story town centers that provide mixed use and preserve scenic views. But TRPA proposes six- to four-story buildings along most of Tahoe's main roadways, and developers are already saying that is not enough.

‘Yes’ versus ‘No’

The League to Save Lake Tahoe agrees with the TRPA that “just say no” is an outdated mentality. We supported the first big redevelopment projects at the lake over a decade ago, the Embassy Suites in South Shore and the timeshare resort at the foot of Ski Run. We also supported the Heavenly Gondola and Village for traffic reduction. These projects made sense because they transferred development from sensitive lands to the already highly dense casino corridor, and created true open space in the process. We have also deferred to communities when it comes to economic development. For example, we set aside our multiple objections to the airport master plan and the convention center that form the city of South Lake Tahoe's vision for its future.

So, “just say no” has been on its way out for a while. However, “just say yes” can also be precarious. TRPA has “just said yes” to a string of projects that set dangerous precedents for irresponsible development in Tahoe. In the absence of checks and balances within the agency, communities are forced to seek the last-resort option of litigation.

These projects make it clear that Tahoe needs a strong environmental watchdog. TRPA “just said yes” to a timeshare project at Sandy Beach campground using excess and incorrect coverage. The League and community successfully fought to reduce the coverage by a third. The Burke Creek project is another example. TRPA “just said yes” to a developer who didn't want to count driveways as coverage, while this is a rule for all other property owners. Furthermore, the agency “just said yes” to new lake shore development that will allow 62,000 more boat trips per year, while existing boat traffic is contributing to pollution violations today.

Cooperation critical

The real question is: Why is the TRPA suddenly unable to put forth projects that are palatable to those outside the development community?

The League to Save Lake Tahoe boasts a 53-year history of offering constructive critique and alternative solutions to Tahoe's environmental challenges. And we often work with diverse interests to do so. For example, 15 years ago, the League initiated the effort to advocate for public funds for Tahoe. Since then, in partnership with the business community, we have secured hundreds of millions of dollars for environmental restoration here.

For this regional plan, the League seeks responsible redevelopment that concentrates on built areas instead of raw land. We seek height limits that protect Tahoe's scenic beauty. We support density changes that reduce traffic into and within Tahoe, and that acknowledge Tahoe's unique driving and living patterns. We seek plans that allow low-impact recreationists to enjoy Tahoe. We have long pushed for a near-shore clarity standard so beachgoers don't have to wade through wads of algae. We seek ongoing community-based planning so that communities aren't caught off-guard by specific projects. Finally, Tahoe needs a basin-wide analysis of just how much pollution, vehicles, boats, and high-impact activities the lake can sustain before it is loved to death.

"Smart growth" is an excellent strategy for urbanized areas, where growth is inevitable. But it is not smart to apply it to Tahoe, a sensitive area that is threatened by growth and overuse.

Tahoe is at a critical juncture. We have common enemies we can unite against: fine sediment, invasive species, pollution, traffic, climate change, and overdevelopment. We must cooperate to find scientifically sound solutions. If we do not, the biggest loser will be Tahoe.

When Congress approved the creation of an agency to protect Lake Tahoe, "build baby build" was not among its recommended strategies. To the contrary, it recognized urbanization as the problem and not the cure.

— Rochelle Nason is executive director of the League to Save Lake Tahoe.