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Urban plan for Tahoe flawed, shortsighted



In final remarks, pre-recorded and played during the 2023 Lake Tahoe Summit, the late Senator Dianne Feinstein [warned about](#) the many threats the Lake faces from overdevelopment, climate change, invasive species and wildfire.

Sadly, Tahoe [land-use documents](#) indicate her remarks fell on deaf ears. Buried deep inside county documents progressing now through the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) are new codes and ordinances with the power to fundamentally degrade Tahoe's surroundings, wildlife habitats and communities.

These Tahoe basin area plan amendments arrived in an "Economic Sustainability and Housing" Trojan horse. If approved, there's a raft of incentives written by and for developers and those eager to further exploit Tahoe's scenic beauty for profit.

The devil is in the details

The amendments would allow urban level [building height and density](#) across the mostly rural Tahoe basin. Has anyone considered how five-story (65-foot) buildings on either side of the two-

lane road around most of the lake will block sunlight or scenic views? Where will water drain, pool or freeze? How much soil will end up moved and covered? Who ensures new buildings don't strictly end up as [luxury condos](#)? Who will tightly enforce deed restrictions? What's to stop an investor from marketing accessory dwelling units (ADUs) specified for workforce housing as short-term rentals? With little to no parking required for new buildings, where will vehicles for their occupants be parked? How many local businesses will be lost to corporate-owned developments?

Let's be clear: Public safety and evacuation, air or water quality, and downstream impacts of pollution or climate challenges are *not* developer and investor priorities. Traffic gridlock, wildfire evacuations, code enforcement and clean drinking water? Those issues will be left to other government agencies, first responders and their budgets to manage.

These sweeping land use changes — the most significant since the 1960s — will radically reshape Tahoe's future. The urbanization plan minutiae, unknown to most, are targeted for approval by year's end. The public will first fully experience the impacts when roads are blocked, excavation machines lumber in and dump trucks roll by with thousands of cubic feet of dirt and dust. Mountain Area Preservation, one of many grassroots community groups, summarized the many [negative impacts](#).

Tahoe has a [tortuous history](#) of development battles. The TRPA, a [federally created](#) bi-state body between Nevada and California, first convened March 17, 1970. Its primary task: *protect* Lake Tahoe and its surrounding basin.

Tahoe Basin protections weakened over time

While most of us were otherwise occupied, a tangled web of business entities and tourism beneficiaries set to work re-architecting the TRPA and watering down its once-strict developer requirements. By 2012 TRPA's last full regional plan update led to six [area plans](#) and a confusing set of [committees](#). It also elevated developer needs and delegated much of the responsibility for land use back to the commercial interests and counties it was meant to oversee.

Can we trust an agency riddled with conflicts of interests to put the safety and well-being of Lake Tahoe and its communities over more lucrative interests?

For example, today's [TRPA Chair](#) Cindy Gustafson is also a Placer County supervisor and former CEO of the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association and North Tahoe Chamber. Her [husband's consulting firm](#) clients are a who's who of Tahoe developers: Palisades Development; Homewood Mountain Resort; New Martis Partners; Northstar-at-Tahoe Resorts and more.

Gustafson and TRPA governing board members, including Washoe County Commission Chair [Alexis Hill](#), also sit on boards and funnel taxpayer money to nonprofits, committees and agencies created by developer and business interests. These include the [Tahoe Prosperity Center](#), creators of [Envision Tahoe](#); the [Tahoe Fund](#); and the [Reno Tahoe Convention & Visitor's Authority](#). They are joined on TRPA's board by [Vince Hoenigman](#), co-founder of a firm that specializes in urban-infill housing in Southern California. Yet, when voting, recusals rarely take place.

The Portland-based [consulting firm](#) that provided the basis for these Tahoe land use changes did previous work in Austin and San Antonio; Sacramento; Kansas City, Missouri; and Bend, Oregon. Those locales have vastly different climate circumstances than exist in the Tahoe Basin.

The complex proposals pending TRPA's approval came together in a confusing patchwork of meetings and presentations, all but intended to avoid in-depth public examination. Such important land use allowances and regulations deserve much more scrutiny. Worse still, local and state officials, planners and developers (along with their highly paid attorneys and consultants) have misrepresented and ignored substantive and thoroughly researched [public feedback](#) provided to date.

There's no more important land use question for this unique area today than this: How many people can Tahoe safely accommodate and evacuate in a mountainous area with few exits and [tens of millions of visitors](#) — many unfamiliar with the terrain?

Before increasing Tahoe's building density and population further, calculate what the Basin can safely hold amid rising climate risks. Tahoe lies in a recognized [double-hazard zone for wildfire](#). Need more reasons to care? There has not been an updated environmental impact study on the cumulative proposed "urban" changes and projects already in the pipeline. Nor has there been adequate recent traffic and wildfire evacuation data-gathering and analysis done. If you are one of the millions who love Tahoe's natural beauty or are one of the 55,000 who call Tahoe home, now is the time to weigh in with comments to pause the Tahoe Area Plan amendment process. Tell TRPA not to urbanize Tahoe's communities and put lives at risk at publiccomment@trpa.gov

There are better and more cost-efficient ways to address Tahoe's housing crunch, such as:

- Severely capping STRs throughout the Tahoe Basin and increase fines and enforcement measures to ensure compliance
- Investing in programs that incentivize repurposing of abandoned buildings that have the infrastructure and parking in place
- Converting existing structures from empty commercial spaces to housing instead of focusing only on new building units
- Requiring large resort employers to provide workforce housing on site
- Encouraging and funding programs such as [Lease to Locals](#).

Decades ago, alarm bells went off when plans took shape to [massively develop Tahoe](#). A 1964 plan once called for a Tahoe population of 313,000 by 1980. The public rallied; those plans didn't come to pass.

Tahoe is far too precious to be paved over and congested further by an urban plan that will jeopardize its future.

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<https://www.rgj.com/story/opinion/2023/11/03/urban-plan-for-tahoe-flawed-shortsighted/71428742007/>