

# North Tahoe Citizen Action Alliance

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*Jerry Wotel, Newsletter Editor*

## NTCAA Newsletter – May 2010

### **Kings Beach Biomass Plant on Fast Track**

Placer County is proposing to build a biomass power-generating facility in Kings Beach. It is also fast tracking the project through changes to its own zoning and planning laws so as to break ground ASAP. However the County's plan is fundamentally and financially flawed as it could achieve its goals more easily and more cheaply.

The main goals of the County's Wildfire Protection and Biomass Utilization Program as they apply to North Tahoe are:

1. Reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfires in our region.
2. Protect local citizens and visitors from the consequences of catastrophic wildfires.
3. Find one or more beneficial uses for excess biomass.
4. Improve air quality in Placer County.

If wildfire protection is pursued (1 and 2), then it will inevitably generate slash, wood chips, and other biomass that needs to be removed from the Basin. What is the best way to achieve this (3) while also improving air quality (4)?

The problem is that the County has wrongly leapt to the conclusion that this means we must build a biomass plant in the Basin. To that end it is channeling hundreds of thousands of County tax dollars and federal grant money (our tax dollars) to build the plant, and is flaunting normal planning procedures.



At their May 18<sup>th</sup> meeting, the Placer County Board of Supervisors took a fast track step forward toward approving a 1-3MW Biomass plant in Kings Beach. The BOS approval of a three-party consulting agreement sets up a reimbursement account with the TRPA, who will actually hire the consultant to prepare the environmental documents for the Biomass Plant. Placer County requested the TRPA to waive normal bidding requirements and negotiate a sole source contract with Ascent Environmental Inc. for a total of \$290,840. TRPA will pay the consultant, and then be reimbursed by Placer County from a Department of Energy federal grant. Why the circuitous route that TRPA hires the consultant and Placer County uses federal funds to reimburse TRPA?

**Why the waiver?** According to Placer County's request, the rationale is "to meet our deadlines...our schedule is to break ground on the facility in 2012 and to be operational in 2013." The TRPA's waiver states, "TRPA will be working in coordination with Placer County on locating a biomass facility in or around the Lake Tahoe Basin." So the answer is political expediency that is to meet a self-imposed deadline on building the power plant. Does this not presuppose approval, without any of the environmental documents prepared or federal NEPA requirements met? Is this justified for the Tahoe Basin, one of three federally designated Outstanding Natural Resource Waters (ONRW)?

**How many people even know about this proposed plant in Kings Beach?** Very few County residents and even fewer Kings Beach residents know anything other than the leading Placer County rationale that open burning of slash piles emits more air pollutants than the proposed power plant. Obviously, but a biomass power plant in Kings Beach may buy its fuel feedstock from the existing market, as do other local biomass plants, if seasonal supplies are not available for full-capacity operation. The range of cost for the feedstock is \$20-\$50 per ton (green to dry material), and is not even close to the cost of removal and conversion into usable fuel. It is this high cost of processing the forest material into fuel feedstock that needs to be heavily subsidized. Ecological burning and burning on slopes greater than 30% would continue even if all other thinning material is subsidized and processed into biomass fuel.



**Is a biomass power plant cost effective?** A biomass power generating plant does not create enough money to subsidize the very high cost of removing forest debris and processing it into fuel. There is a shortage of biomass feedstock on the market so any increase of feedstock product will be purchased by existing biomass plants. The Loyalton Biomass plant, located 41 miles from the Cabin Creek processing facility, (Kings Beach proposed site is 17 miles) is only operating at half its designed output of 20MW because of the lack of fuel. So why build

more biomass power plants when fuel shortage is the problem?

**Health issues?** Biomass power generating plants are proposed for many communities in America. There is little empirical data to evaluate the health effects with certainty. However, questions have been raised by medical groups across the country on the safety of the biomass plant generated particulate matter and its known effect on the human cardiopulmonary system. Ninety-eight chemicals, among them lead, mercury, formaldehyde, chloroform, arsenic, two types of dioxin, and carbon monoxide emerge from the smokestack.

**Is a biomass transfer facility feasible?** Currently, biomass is chipped on site and then transported to the County facility at Cabin Creek. From there it is hauled to the Loyalton Plant, in a more or less "green" state. The best option is to set up a biomass grinding and drying facility before transfer, with a stump grinder where biomass can be reduced to sizes that are compact and easy to transport. The facility may need some land where biomass can be dried outdoors before transport. This procedure will almost triple the value of load transported, and could be done at the Cabin Creek site. Trucking the biomass the 41 miles to Loyalton would cost only a few dollars per dry ton.

Placer County's plan for the Kings Beach Biomass Plant is fundamentally and financially flawed as it could achieve its goals more easily and more cheaply with a basin-located biomass grinding, drying, and transfer facility to remove the slash from the forests and convert it to fuel feedstock and transport it to existing plants.

Having run some tentative financial numbers, NTCAA finds it hard to believe that building a brand new biomass power-generating plant in Kings Beach can possibly be the most attractive option. It is certainly not the best way to use our tax money.

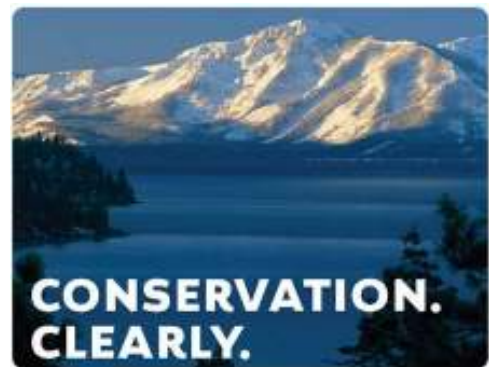
Such a biomass transfer facility would require much less upfront investment, than constructing a new power-generating facility in Kings Beach, be cheaper to operate, and provide more income for the County. Not burning the biomass material in the Kings Beach community would also alleviate health concerns.

### **Economics of the Regional Plan Update**

In the following March 2010 study, **Lake Tahoe EIP 2010-2020: An Economic Analysis of Private Source Storm Water BMP Expenditures on Redevelopment Projects** is a brief economic analysis of how many new projects would be necessary to pay the private sector share of BMP's, that is about \$170 million over the next ten years. The report is the first to connect the private funding of BMP's to the private share of the EIP Program under the proposed Regional Plan. The report concludes:

**“In order to meet updated EIP targets for private sector redevelopment with a medium BMP% expenditure level, 1.4 projects would need to be completed every year. For comparison, this is nearly one Heavenly Village or Boulder Bay sized project every year.”**

The analysis did not distinguish a project's BMP expenditure on its own parcel from its contribution to region wide BMP's or what comprises the list of Environmental Improvement Program (EIP) projects. But it does provide the first look at the rate and scale of redevelopment projects the Regional Plan Update must assume to meet its target.



### **TRPA Regional Plan Update – Tourist Accommodation Units**

The TRPA Compact includes “the power to establish environmental threshold carrying capacities and to maintain such capacities while providing opportunities for orderly growth and development consistent with such capacities.”

Threshold Carrying Capacities are standards of environmental quality targets to be achieved in the Tahoe Region. The standards identify the level of human impact the Lake Tahoe environment can take before irreparable damage occurs. The water quality threshold is currently being exceeded. Air quality is degraded primarily from transportation and heating sources.

These primary environmental thresholds are directly related to the residential and tourist development at Lake Tahoe. The relationship is simple: the more people the greater the environmental impact.

Large development, or redevelopment, trends are becoming prevalent on the North and West Shores of Lake Tahoe from the construction of large complexes of fractional ownership and timeshare facilities. This is exemplified by the Villas at Harborside, and Tonopalo Resort, and currently in process are the Homewood Mountain Resort, Boulder Bay, and the Tahoe Vista Partners Sandy Beach timeshare development.

It is common sense to acknowledge that increasing population increases environmental impact. In fact, as the Lake clarity has decreased about 30% since 1968, when the measurements began, and the resident and tourist population of Lake Tahoe has also increased 30%, according to the US Census. To satisfy the TRPA Compact then requires a compensating approach to orderly growth and development.

One concept that the TRPA utilizes to maintain orderly growth, and protect the environment of Lake Tahoe, is through the system of Tourist Accommodation Unit (TAU) allocation. Most TAUs represent a 250 sq. ft. motel room, but are currently used in developing timeshare units of 3000 sq. ft., and more, and all having multiple bedrooms per unit. It is reasonable to assume that the intent of building units with multiple bedrooms is to appeal to increased occupancy per unit. This can easily result in a 400% increase per unit in the number of tourists and therefore environmental impact from vehicle use and infrastructure demands.

To protect the environment of the Lake is to modify the existing Tourist Accommodation Unit transfer criteria to one TAU per bedroom. The direct benefits would be environmental improvements to Lake Tahoe by reduction of land coverage, decrease of vehicle trips, less air pollution, and preservation of the scale and character of individual communities.

NTCAA has been promoting this policy for the last two years. The TRPA Staff is now supporting this position. However, the TRPA Governing Board has yet to approve it. TRPA Staff recommends that the correlation of TAUs with bedrooms would realistically mitigate the impact of the development of multiple-bedroom timeshares while leaving design flexibility to developers. The North Tahoe Citizen Action Alliance fully supports this approach.

According to the Gallup Poll, a clear majority of Americans have chosen the environment over the economy since Gallup began asking it more than 20 years ago saying that protecting the environment should be given priority "even at the risk of curbing economic growth," I would expect a specific poll of Lake Tahoe residents would be substantially higher.

NTCAA hopes that the TRPA Governing Board agrees with the majority of Americans to protect our "Outstanding National Resource Water" that is Lake Tahoe, by supporting orderly growth and development by supporting the policy of one TAU per bedroom.



### **Tahoe Vista Restoration Project**

Placer County's cleanup efforts of an abandoned concrete batch plant on the North Shore of Lake Tahoe have been bolstered by the awarding of three grants, totaling \$600,000, towards restoration efforts in the Snow Creek wetlands. The restoration project, managed by the Placer County Department of Public Works Ta-

hoe Engineering Division, will address water quality concerns in the Tahoe Vista watershed.

The property, known as the TNT Materials plant is located on Gun Club Road in Tahoe Vista and was a materials-based, concrete batch plant facility since 1948. Placer County Department of Public Works, Tahoe Engineering, is the owner of the property, having acquired it in August of 2008 with a \$2 million grant from the Sierra Nevada Conservancy. The property consists of eight individual parcels totaling a little more than an acre. The total restoration will be about two acres. Additional public easements between the parcels are owned by the Department of Public Works and create a project area of almost three acres. (*Placer County News Release*)

### **Did You Know...?**

- The Sandy Beach Timeshare/Fractional Ownership Development litigation has been settled. The TRPA and Tahoe Vista Partners (TVP) have reached an agreement that the recognized existing land coverage has been reduced from 174,324 sq. ft. to 125,102 sq. ft. TVP no longer has to build the six affordable housing units on-site but will be provided within the existing housing stock. New site plans with the agreed changes must be submitted within 18 months.
- The Vista Village Affordable Housing Development in Tahoe Vista is “on hold at the request of the Applicant”- no formal action has been taken to withdraw the application.
- Placer County Redevelopment Agency will host a Community Workshop on the Kings Beach Eastern Gateway at 8784 North Lake Boulevard (across from the Caliente Restaurant). Come share your ideas from 5-7 pm.

**Upcoming Events/Key Dates**

Agendas for TRPA Governing Board and APC, and also Placer County BOS are not available until a few days before the meeting. Therefore, it is difficult to provide a meaningful emphasis to the meetings. Other meetings/events not shown here, or changes, will be announced by email.

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|--------------------|------------------------|--------------------------------|
| June 2, Wednesday  | NLTRA Board Meeting    | 8:30 am, TCPUD Board Room      |
| June 8, Tuesday    | NTPUD Board Meeting    | 10 am, NTEC, Kings Beach       |
| June 8, Tuesday    | Placer County BOS Mtg. | 8:30 am, Auburn                |
| June 9, Wednesday  | TRPA APC Meeting       | 9:30 am, TRPA Stateline Office |
| June 10, Thursday  | NTRAC Meeting          | 6 pm, TCPUD Board Room         |
| June 15, Tuesday   | RDA Community Workshop | 5-7 pm, 8784 NLB, Kings Beach  |
| June 16, Wednesday | NTFPD Board Meeting    | 6 pm, TCPUD Board Room         |
| June 18, Friday    | TCPUD Board Meeting    | 8:30 am, TCPUD Board Room      |
| June 22, Tuesday   | Placer County BOS Mtg. | 8:30 am, Auburn                |
| June 23, Wednesday | TRPA Governing Board   | 9:30 am, TRPA Stateline Office |

TRPA – Tahoe Regional Planning Agency  
 NLTRA – North Lake Tahoe Resort Association  
 TCPUD – Tahoe City Public Utility District  
 NTEC – North Tahoe Event Center (NTCC)  
 BOS – Placer County Board of Supervisors

APC – Advisory Planning Commission  
 NTPUD – North Tahoe Public Utility District  
 NTFPD – North Tahoe Fire Protection District  
 NTRAC- North Tahoe Regional Advisory Council

***“Patience and perseverance have a magical affect before which difficulties disappear and obstacles vanish.” ..... John Quincy Adams***

Contributors to this newsletter: Dave McClure, Paul Vatistas, and Jerry Wotel