

The path to better transportation

Microtransit and regional plans can ease traffic and impacts

By Chris Joseph

LEAGUE TO SAVE LAKE TAHOE

For most of us, it's an afterthought. You have somewhere to go, so you get in the car and drive yourself. Simple. Yet, that unconscious reliance on our vehicles has a very real and lasting impact on Lake Tahoe's environment and our quality of life.

Why it matters

The tiny specks of ground-up pavement and dust created by traffic rolling over roads and parking lots are the primary threat to Tahoe's water clarity. Synthetic rubber in your tires is also likely a major source of microplastics (tiny strands and bits of petroleum-based trash) that pollute our lake. Tailpipe emissions contribute to climate change, while also providing food for algae that can turn Tahoe's blue water green. That's not to mention the stress we feel from sitting in traffic. Being car-centric is bad for people and the environment.

To Keep Tahoe Blue, the League to Save Lake Tahoe (League), Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA) and many other public and private entities are working to reduce dependency on the (private) automobile. In other words, we're working to create alternative, lake-friendly ways for people to get around. That goal is not new. It is a core tenet of the revised 1980 Bi-State Compact, a legal agreement that's the foundation for Tahoe's nation-leading environmental regulations and protections.

How we got here

In the race to improve transportation in Tahoe, we started from behind, thanks to history. By the time the original 1969 Bi-State Compact that created TRPA was enacted, most of the buildable area in the Tahoe Basin was already covered in car-centric development.

Fast forward to 2012. TRPA's updated Lake Tahoe Regional Plan placed a renewed emphasis on transportation solutions to offset the impacts of development. The plan prioritized active transportation, or creating walkable and bikeable communities, plus transit, as noncar alternatives.

Getting back on track

However, there still is a mismatch: development is largely privately funded,



Photos: League to Save Lake Tahoe

When vehicles back up on busy highways (below), tailpipe emissions worsen. One lake-friendly alternative is to use a free, microtransit solution like Lake Link (above).



whereas transportation improvements are mostly publicly funded. Financial backers of new development must be convinced that paying into transportation improvements is in their best interest — or they must be compelled to pay in through permit conditions.

The League is heavily involved in conversations with developers and land-use planners to ensure new building and redevelopment projects don't just offset the impacts from their clientele's traffic, but improve our transportation system for everyone.

The truth is, every business and organization that benefits from public transit, bike paths, and sidewalks should provide financial support, whether they're building a new project or not.

Much of transportation funding for

public transit and infrastructure is allocated based on population, leaving Tahoe with a meager share. Although 2 million visitors spend around 17 million days in the basin each year, full-time residents number only 54,000. So, publicly funded buses have to do a whole lot with very little. The same goes for Tahoe's roads, which feel far more wear and tear than there are dollars for maintenance. Righting this imbalance by ensuring Tahoe gets the resources it deserves is a central focus of the League's lobbying work.

The 2020 Regional Transportation Plan, which charts Tahoe's transportation vision through 2045 in terms of specific projects, looks at funding challenges realistically. The plan's goal of reducing vehicle miles traveled (VMT), and the

pollution it creates, comes with a \$20 million annual funding gap. To bridge the gap, the costs must be shared between federal, state, and local governments, and potentially by everyone who drives into the basin and parks their car.

Where we go from here

In Tahoe, one single large project — like a subway, bridge, or tunnel — is not going to solve our travel conundrum. Instead, Tahoe's trail to better transportation is made up of multiple projects working together to create a connected system.

Challenges aside, Tahoe has made progress, which builds momentum for more progress.

Regional microtransit programs provide free, on-demand rides. On the North and West shores, TART Connect shuttles carry workers, residents, and visitors. Lake Link does the same on the South Shore. The League first funded and launched the microtransit concept in Tahoe in 2018. Now, after seeing sustained high demand, we are working to electrify the fleets.

The East Shore Corridor Plan, part of the 2020 Regional Transportation Plan, has implemented a combination of managed parking in Incline Village with the bike- and pedestrian-focused East Shore Trail to Sand Harbor. This "demonstration" project shows that people are willing to pay to park, and those fees can fund alternative modes of travel. It has cleared the way for the construction of additional managed parking lots for Chimney Beach and Spooner Summit on the East Shore, to be followed by improved trails and transit service.

All aboard

Before transportation projects improve how you get around, they take shape as road cones and lane closures. Put that temporary annoyance in perspective. Fifteen-minute construction delays for one summer are better than a future of endless, creeping traffic and a dull, green lake.

Tahoe is changing, so we all need to change as well. After a few years, keeping your car parked won't just be a viable option, it will be your unconscious habit — one that's better for you and the lake's beautiful, blue waters.

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