

May 1, 2024

Legislative Committee for the Review and Oversight of the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency
and the Marlette Lake Water System

Re: Solutions to litter issues on Tahoe's east shore

Committee Chair, Vice Chair and members -

As you travel along the east shore of Lake Tahoe today, and visit the Thunderbird Lodge, we would like you to notice the efforts the League to Save Lake Tahoe (the League, AKA Keep Tahoe Blue), in collaboration with our state and local partners, have been making to reduce litter and roadside parking throughout the corridor while maintaining recreation access. We have been working to identify and implement solutions within our capacity as a nonprofit organization while weighing in on plans and advocating for funding to complete the State Route 28 Corridor Project. Details are provided in the pages below.

If you see Bill Watson at the Thunderbird, please ask him how the litter, trespassing, and environmental degradation issues are now compared to the past. We hope you will hear about the progress that has been made and the work that still needs to be done. He is a wealth of knowledge and solutions oriented like us at the League.

All of this work is part of our mission to protect and restore the environmental health, sustainability and scenic beauty of the Lake Tahoe Basin.

We look forward to seeing you at Sand Harbor to talk about the innovative new beach cleaning robot we are enabling and our new Blue Beaches program.

Sincerely,



Darcie Colins
Chief Executive Officer



Gavin Feiger
Policy Director

Keep Tahoe Blue Litter Initiative: East Shore Litter Reduction

Problem Statement

Lake Tahoe's east shore, along State Route 28 in Nevada between Incline Village and Spooner Summit, has several popular beaches and a mix of established parking and trails and illegal roadside parking and social trails. The corridor is one of the top tourist destinations in the Lake Tahoe Basin, with Sand Harbor State Park as the most popular location. Recreation management has not kept pace with the increase in visitation resulting in serious environmental damage from parking on dirt, trampling vegetation and, maybe most impactful, littering. League staff has identified three of the most highly-impacted areas where resource damage can be addressed in the short term: improved management of the Incline to Sand Harbor bike path, parking management and education at Thunderbird Cove, and litter abatement at the unofficial Spooner sled hill.

Background

The State Route (SR) 28 Corridor Plan ([link](#)) was adopted by the Tahoe Transportation District (TTD) in 2013 to address recreation impacts from Incline Village to Spooner summit on Tahoe's east shore. The Plan calls for a separated paved multi-use trail, expanded and new off-street parking, improved and additional restrooms, social trail consolidation and management, and improved trash service. The section from Incline to Sand Harbor was completed in 2019 and is known as the Tahoe East Shore Trail (formerly known as the North Demonstration Project of the Nevada Stateline-to-Stateline Bike Path). The Demonstration Project includes a 3-mile section of multi-use trail, managed off-highway parking, increased parking enforcement, and additional visitor management with some regular litter pickup and restroom maintenance. The SR 28 Corridor Plan will continue the bike path, parking management, and recreation management from Sand Harbor to Spooner. While this project will likely solve many of the problems, including the "hot spot" at Thunderbird Cove, the Plan will not be implemented for several years at best and there is a critical need to address parking and litter issues immediately. Additionally, management needs to be improved along the Incline to Sand Harbor path that has been completed and the Spooner sled hill is beyond the project boundary.



East Shore Trail

The East Shore Trail has been even more popular than expected. While that makes it a great demonstration project for parking management (creating paid parking lots and restricting roadside parking), and providing alternatives to driving (bike path and east shore express bus), the number of people using it have resulted in resource damage. More people have resulted in more litter and graffiti and new social trails cutting off of the paved trail. The paid parking system funds management of the trail and parking areas, and an MOU is in place with all relevant land managers (the Corridor Management Team - CMT) and operators to direct those funds. Nevada State Parks (NV Parks) is in charge of litter control and restroom maintenance. They are able to spend about 2 hours per day during the busy season and two hours 3-4 days a week in the off season. There is also a parking ambassador at the paid parking lots to explain the system and help educate visitors. It is unclear if more hours are needed or if those hours need to be spent more efficiently. The League has a few Tahoe Blue Crew (TBC) groups that clean up along the trail and parking lots.

Thunderbird Cove

This is a small cove just north of the Thunderbird on United States Forest Service (USFS) land. The cove has a very small beach area at low lake levels, with rock outcroppings transitioning to forest and a small riparian zone landward. In 2021, the League to Save Lake Tahoe (League), NV Parks, and the Thunderbird Lodge Preservation Society reached out to USFS and Nevada Department of Transportation (NDOT) with a proposed solution to increasing environmental degradation north of the Thunderbird Lodge.



Key

- USFS Trail
- Public Beach Area
- Approximate Thunderbird Property

Over the last decade, the area has become better and better known for free beach access as a replacement for Sand Harbor and Chimney Beach which are often at capacity. This area is recognized as being overused and based on rough counts in 2020, up to 600 people were observed in the area that is accessible from the highway on a busy summer day. The overuse was exacerbated due to COVID, but it is an ongoing problem spot which needs to be addressed. This cove can only accommodate a few dozen people but a few hundred people regularly parked illegally and heavily impact the area with social trails, vast amounts of litter, dangerous and sometimes illegal fires and open grills, human feces, social trails, graffiti, etc. It is even heavily used at nights with regular law enforcement response to fights and illegal fires.

In 2021, the League, Thunderbird Lodge, and NV Parks reached out to USFS and NDOT with a proposal to use physical barriers to restrict parking to the limited paved areas that could accommodate a handful of cars - the amount of use appropriate from the site. Despite an adjacent NDOT water quality project occurring in 2021 and some initial interest due to safety, water quality, and resource protection impacts, neither NDOT or USFS was able to commit to implementing solutions. This was in part due to the meandering property line between USFS and NDOT right-of-way in the area. In July of 2021, volunteers installed wooden bollards to block off the dirt areas in the Thunderbird Cove pullout and installed new signage regarding parking and litter. In August, NDOT surrounded the bollards with rip-rap, also extending along both sides of the highway. At last report, parking visitation, and litter were both reduced to some extent. People are finding new places to park directly along and off the highway, but the amount of trash - especially large items like BBQs and coolers - was noticeably less.



Spooner sled hill

This unofficial and very popular sledding area at Spooner Summit has been a litter hotspot for years. It is plagued by the too common problem of multiple land managers with overlapping lands and responsibilities but not enough resources. The hill itself is on USFS land while the parking lot (where the AIS station is located in the summer) is maintained by NDOT. For years, League volunteers have been picking up trash on and around the sledding hill. There have never been garbage cans or restrooms, and there is no parking management, making it a messy free for all when thousands of people descend on the area over a busy winter day. Over the 2020-21 winter, one Blue Crew conducted 30 cleanups for a total of 134 hours and collected 1,981 pounds of trash. This is commendable, but there is nowhere to put the trash after it is collected. NDOT has been able to pick up the collected trash somewhat regularly, but not always. The League also worked with the Tahoe Fund to build a sled corral and install educational signs. Those efforts did not have much of an effect. The sled corral turned into a big garbage corral and the signs did not seem to reduce the amount of litter. The situation was not sustainable - our Blue Crews cannot keep up with the litter, the sledding area is becoming more popular, and the land managers do not have the funding or staff time to provide the solutions needed. Additionally, the USFS does not want to formalize and manage the sled hill, including putting up signs, because that will make them liable for injuries that could happen during snow play. In the spring of 2021, League staff and Blue Crew met with the Tahoe Fund, USFS, and NDOT to start planning for winter 2021-22. We were not able to get any of the land managers or patterns to take a leadership role, or even unofficially support our grassroots efforts. After a couple months of bureaucracy and planning in November and December of 2021, League staff applied for and received a Temporary Use Permit to install a dumpster and two portable restrooms for a 2 month pilot, beginning at the end of January 2022. NDOT also contracted Clean Tahoe to pick up trash at least 5 mornings per week, which also seemed to help.

League Position on and Current Status of East Shore Litter

Each of these three efforts, if successful, will be examples of how to deal with different types of litter hotspots throughout the Tahoe Basin.

East Shore Trail

In spring and summer of 2021, League staff joined Corridor Management Team (CMT) meetings to express our concerns and provide cleanup data from our TBCs. The CMT reaffirmed that Nevada State Parks is responsible for litter cleanup and they are a little short on funding to add more staff hours, but they will reconsider “hot spot” areas they focus on and try to adjust staff seasonally to address the busiest times. The League received fewer complaints of litter issues 2021-23 and Blue Crew data shows fewer cleanups and less litter reported. We will continue to use TBC data and observations along with the Citizen Science litter reporting app to help identify litter hot spots and even real-time litter issues that we can share with NV Parks in the hopes that they will have the resources to respond.

Thunderbird Cove

The SR 28 Corridor plan will provide some relief, but it is being implemented slowly due to a lack of funding and the damage to the environment may be irreparable by then. After we instigated some remedies in 2021 (bollards followed by NDOT rip-rap), we still want to see the following solutions implemented that do not conflict with the ongoing plans for the entire corridor of the specific location adjacent to the Thunderbird property:

- On the mountain (east) side, remove the “authorized vehicles parking” sign and replace it with “no parking,” use barriers and signage to restrict roadside parking and illegal OHV access and use.
- Extend no parking to Marlette Creek (the area is being overused and one of the solutions identified in Washoe area plan is roadway parking controls). The 2013 Corridor plan identifies this as a need.
- Install interpretative signage at the trailhead, following recommendations in the 2007-11 USFS project – Thunderbird history, resource protection, and rules addressing social trails, litter, and fire safety.

The visitor demographics have changed at Thunderbird Cove. There are fewer vehicles, but trending more toward large families/groups in large vans. They descend on the Cove and forest with BBQs, food, floaties, etc. Thunderbird staff continues to clean up regularly, and especially after each weekend.

Spoooner Sled Hill

In the winter of 2021-2022 (January 15 - April 7), the League funded a pilot project to provide a dumpster and two portable restrooms in the parking area, along with additional signage about proper waste disposal. NDOT also contracted Clean Tahoe to conduct litter pickups 5 days per week, in the mornings. Finally, our Tahoe Blue Crew, Team Uppaway, continued to conduct cleanups, incentivized by the solutions we implemented. Success from the 2021-22 winter include:

- More trash, less litter. In 2021, our Tahoe Blue Crew collected nearly 2,000 pounds of trash (4,000 gallons) in the sledding area and parking lot. Combined with the less frequent Clean Tahoe efforts, we estimate the total trash at nearly 3,000 pounds (6,000 gallons). In 2022, the Blue Crew only collected 126 pounds of trash from the area (344 gallons). The dumpster collected 30 cubic yards of trash (6,000 gallons). Clean Tahoe also collected a large amount of garbage, but they have not shared their data yet.

- Improved signage. The League created and had professionally made large signs in English and Spanish directing people to use the dumpster, proper use of the sled corral, and portable restroom cleanliness.
- More and improved partnerships. We coordinated closely with NDOT for the first time, increased engagement with the Forest Service and Nevada State Parks, and brought in code compliance to address illegal vendors.

Realistically long term, there are only two options - manage the sledding area or close it down. Closing the parking lot is not desirable for a number of reasons - NDOT uses the lot for snow removal operations and people would just park along the highway more making it more unsafe. The hill itself is public lands and the public should be able to access it for free and have fun, but we considered conducting a restoration project to make sledding less desirable (planting trees and placing boulders) while allowing other uses. We also tried to work with NDOT to find a way to permit a concessionaire in the parking area to sell food and drinks and maybe sell or rent snow play equipment and/or manage the lot as paid parking. The concessionaire would then be responsible for providing restrooms and making sure the area is clean of litter.

In late 2022, we gave up on NDOT's support for a more permanent solution and re-initiated the temporary permitting of a dumpster and porta potties for the 2022-23 winter season (December - April). We had similar results as the 2021-22 season in terms of litter abatement.

After continued discussions with NDOT, and elevating our requests to the Director level, we finally got them to pay for dumpster and restrooms for the next two winters (2023-24 and 2024-25). NDOT amended their agreement with Clean Tahoe to include maintenance of a six yard dumpster in addition to the previously provided litter removal. The agreement also includes two portable restrooms to be serviced twice a week. The dumpster and restrooms will be provided roughly Dec. 1st- Apr. 1st when the sled hill is in use.