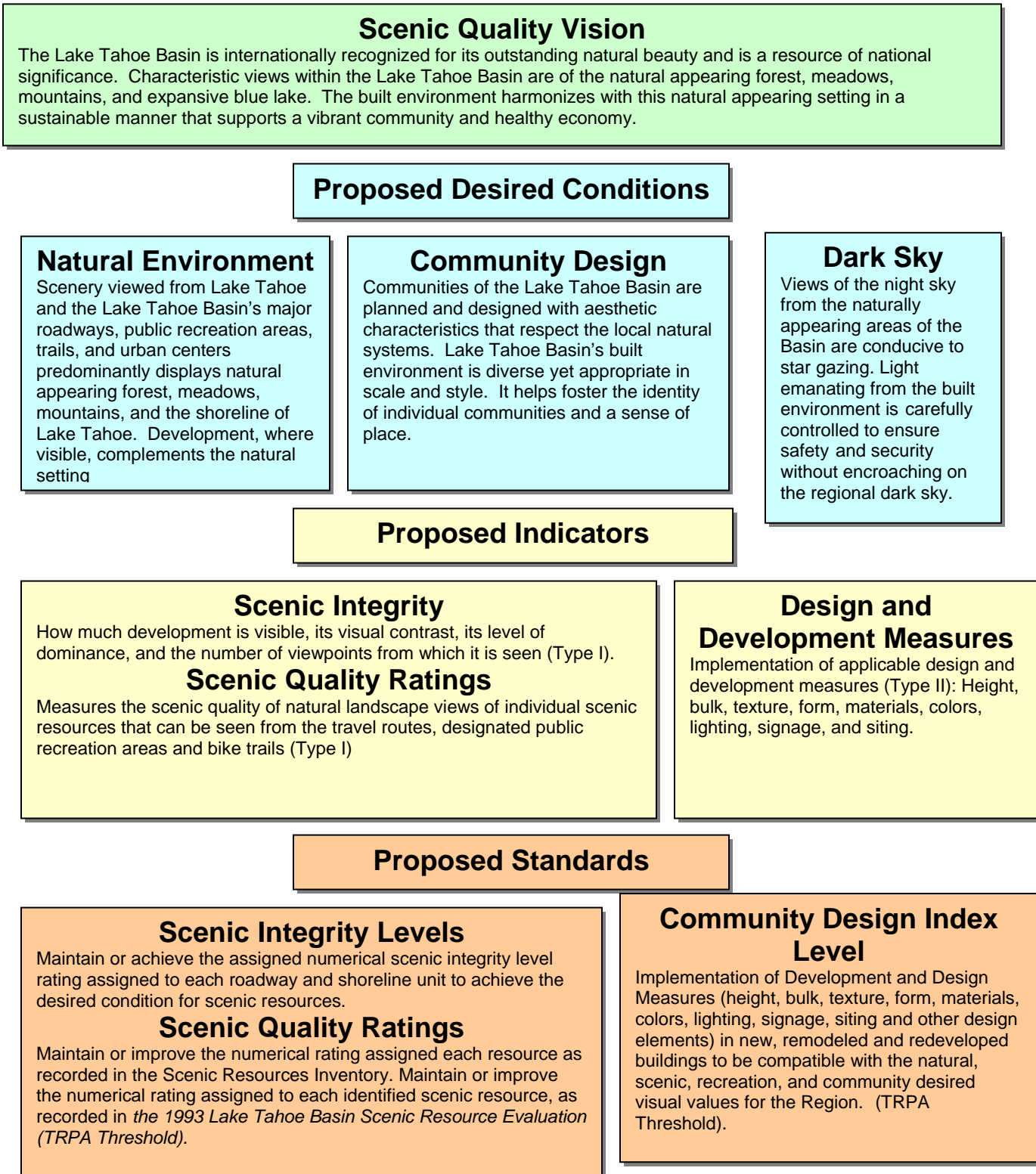


## Chapter 11 - SCENIC QUALITY

Figure 11-1. Pathway Recommendations for Scenic Quality



## 11.0 SCENIC QUALITY

Scenic quality is the most evident natural resource of value in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Views are of a magnificent lake setting within a forested, mountainous environment. The Lake Tahoe Basin is unique in that it combines visual elements normally found in several different landscape settings in one, clearly defined region exhibiting exceptionally high aesthetic values. The scenery attracts many people as residents and draws millions of visitors to the Lake Tahoe Basin each year. Demands of residents and visitors on the Lake Tahoe Basin landscape differ from one another in some ways. This results in competing influences on scenic resources. Residents and visitors all share a fundamental desire to protect and maintain the striking, natural-appearing scenery the Lake Tahoe Basin is known for. At the same time, development in various forms is necessary to serve the needs of visitors and the local population, and therefore must have a place in the Lake Tahoe Basin. It is essential to understand and address the relationship between the natural and built environments in order to successfully perpetuate the region's high scenic quality and accommodate the daily needs of people.

Lake Tahoe Basin scenic quality has experienced cycles of degradation and improvement. The forested lands are more attractive now than they have been in some periods. In the late 1800s the Lake Tahoe Basin was intensively logged (perhaps 70 million board feet a year). Fire was a common occurrence. Not only were the mountains stripped of vegetation, but the aesthetic value of Lake Tahoe itself was diminished as the lake lost color and clarity. Between 1890 and 1950, the forests became reestablished under a management regime of fire suppression. The development of cabins and resorts maintained a rustic character that blended with the mountain landscape. In the 1950s, however, new forms of development came to the Lake Tahoe Basin, bringing new, drastic changes to the scenic resource. High-rise casinos, neon lights, strip development, ski runs, and urban development, particularly in meadows and marshes, reduced the natural scenic value of the Lake Tahoe Basin landscape. Since that period the scenic quality of the Lake Tahoe Basin environment has rebounded, to a certain extent.

The high quality of the scenic environment of the Lake Tahoe Basin is attributed to several factors:

- The dominant element is Lake Tahoe , a water feature of remarkable color, clarity, size and depth, visible from many areas of the basin that results in a single large feature;
- Distinctive mountain landforms that surround the flat plane of Lake Tahoe and create an enclosed landscape type;
- Skylines (often ridgelines) that define the earth-sky silhouette;
- Conspicuous water-land edges;
- Conspicuous edges between different vegetation types; and
- Numerous feature elements, such as streams and rock formations, and sand and rocky beaches that are less dominant than Lake Tahoe but create smaller feature sub-landscapes.

It is this natural landscape, seen from the region's scenic corridors, recreation areas and trails that the framers of the TRPA Compact intended to preserve when they declared, "Maintenance of the social and economic health of the Region depends on maintaining the significant scenic values provided by the Lake Tahoe Basin." (TRPA Compact, Public Law 96-551-Dec. 19, 1980, Article I).

## **Public Opinion**

Through Pathway 2007 public outreach efforts the public has expressed a strong desire to maintain the scenic integrity of the Lake Tahoe Basin while accommodating the desire and need for development. The public desires:

- Exceptional scenic quality;
- Protection of lake views;
- Protection of night sky views (minimization of lighting in order to allow for predominance of natural, night-time light);
- Flexibility in design to ensure that desired community character is achieved;
- Adoption of regulations to prevent further loss of critical views; and
- Coordination of forest management strategies on public lands to preserve and enhance valued scenic character.

It is in the interest of all that the natural appearance of the landscape be protected. The exceptional scenic quality of the Tahoe Basin benefits visitors, local communities, and the economy of the Region. It is intended that all aspects of scenic quality be addressed through the Pathway 2007 process.

## **Management focus**

Scenic resource management 1) perpetuates the overall natural-appearing setting and protects the significant scenic features of the Lake Tahoe Basin, and 2) ensures that development, when it does occur, is appropriate for the area in which it is located in terms of size, mass, architectural style, and density. The proposed Desired Conditions, Indicators and Standards reflect existing, multi-agency management goals for scenic quality, though some modifications are proposed to address inadequacies in the current system and related public concerns.

Factors that influence scenic quality in the Lake Tahoe Basin include:

- Type, intensity, location, and visual characteristics of land use;
- Visual dominance competition between the natural and built environments; and
- Management activities (particularly in sensitive, undeveloped areas such as forests, meadows, and stream environment zones).

## **Scenic Threshold System**

The Scenic Threshold System employed in the Lake Tahoe Basin is a unique approach to addressing complex scenic quality issues. Not many places in the country have attempted to systematically document scenic conditions over a quarter of a century, or to set firm, quantitative, cumulative thresholds for scenic resource management. The system has successfully constrained some development trends which would otherwise have irrevocably damaged the scenic quality of the Lake Tahoe Basin, and has led to significant improvements in the attractiveness of key commercial areas. Because of the significance of scenic quality to the social and economic health of the region, a Scenic Threshold System of evaluating proposed projects and monitoring the Lake Tahoe Basin for impacts to scenic quality will continue to be used.

## 11.1 SCENIC RESOURCES VISION

### SCENIC RESOURCES VISION

The Lake Tahoe Basin is internationally recognized for its outstanding natural beauty and is a resource of national significance. Characteristic views within the Lake Tahoe Basin are of the natural appearing forest, meadows, mountains, and expansive blue lake. The built environment harmonizes with this natural appearing setting in a sustainable manner that supports a vibrant community and healthy economy.

## 11.2 NEED FOR CHANGE

### Tahoe Regional Planning Agency

The Tahoe Scenic Threshold System is unique and innovative for the time of its development in the 1970s. However, as the system has evolved over thirty years in order to address new trends, it has grown and changed incrementally. The Scenic Threshold System is in need of reorganization and streamlining. This section assesses the advantages and shortcomings of the current system, and discusses a basis for substantive amendment to the system based on key principles for appropriate scenic resource management in the Lake Tahoe Basin.

The Travel Route Rating Methodology forms the backbone of the larger Scenic Threshold System. The Travel Route Ratings are based on a mix of factors that were not specifically designed to reflect the needs of the Scenic Thresholds.

The following list contains some key areas of difficulty identified in the Travel Route Rating Methodology:

- Not sensitive enough to adequately reflect changes over a five- year monitoring period;
- Too complex to understand;
- Assumes all parts of the roadway have the same inherent scenic quality and visual absorption capability; and
- Assumes all parts of the shoreline have the same inherent scenic quality and visual absorption capability.

As noted above, the scenic thresholds are set up in a manner that anticipates all roadway units and all shoreline units will achieve or exceed a similar acceptable rating despite differences in the inherent landscape character of each unit and capability to visually absorb development. Although it is ideal to have a high degree of scenic quality in all units, those which do not have views of Lake Tahoe or are dominated by development are in essence penalized under the current system. The scenic thresholds call for the maintenance or improvement of the numeric rating of each unit. It is virtually impossible to develop a property which was formerly undeveloped natural forest land and maintain the same rating. While the goal is to maintain or improve the scenic quality of the Lake Tahoe Basin, there needs to be some allowance for the scenic impact of legal developments on yet-undeveloped land.

## **US Forest Service (USFS) Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit (LTBMU)**

The groundbreaking USFS Visual Management System (VMS) of 1973 was the most advanced of its time. The Visual Management System aimed to achieve "visual quality" within National Forests through its program to minimize visible disturbance to prescribed levels. Since 1973 other important scenery considerations have been identified, such as public validation of the scenery values to be protected, and the longevity of scenery values within an ever-changing ecological context.

The VMS has been improved, expanded and approved for phased implementation nationwide. This new, improved version of the VMS is called the USFS Scenery Management System (SMS) of 1997. SMS is best-implemented during a revision of a Forest Plan, which will occur for the USFS Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit during Pathway 2007 planning. The SMS incorporates human values into ecosystem management. The principal changes required by SMS are:

- Involve the public to better-identify and perpetuate the socially-valued scenery within the many diverse places of the Lake Tahoe Basin;
- Apply ecosystem opportunities (physical - biological - social / structures - processes - functions) to ensure that the valued scenery can be sustained through time; and
- Provide effective, state-of-the-art methods, terminology and data (to inventory, measure, communicate and integrate the scenic resource considerations into the Tahoe Basin's overall Desired Conditions, and implement and monitor its scenic resource accomplishments through time).

## **11.3 DESIRED CONDITION 1: NATURAL ENVIRONMENT**

### **11.3.1 Proposed Indicators for Natural Environment**

#### **Proposed Indicators for Natural Environment**

##### **Scenic Integrity**

How much development is visible, its visual contrast, its level of dominance, and the number of viewpoints from which it is seen. (Type II)

##### **Scenic Quality Ratings**

Measures the scenic quality of natural landscape views of individual scenic resources that can be seen from the travel routes, designated public recreation areas and bike trails. (Type I)

## Scenic Integrity

It is necessary to have standards for the extent of visual evidence of development in different areas throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin if its scenic beauty is to be preserved. This indicator represents how much visual evidence of development is visible in any given area, its visual contrast, its level of dominance, and the number of viewpoints from which it is seen. It measures the degree to which a landscape is visually perceived to be “complete” between the natural and developed environment and can be expressed in terms of dominance. The indicator can be expressed as a level of visual dominance exhibited by development with respect to the surrounding setting. Visual dominance of any development can be reliably assessed (measured) and classified as visually non-evident, subordinate, co-dominant, or dominant.

## Methodology

“Scenic Integrity Level” refers to how much visual evidence of development is acceptable in a given area in order to produce the desired condition for scenic resources. As an initial step in setting standards for Scenic Integrity Levels, the entire Lake Tahoe Basin would be inventoried according to Scenic Character Themes. These themes are visually distinctive types of land use and development. (This would be in addition to the current shoreline and roadway travel analysis units, which do not fully encompass Basin valued scenic features and viewsheds.)

The Scenic Character Themes proposed for the Tahoe Basin include:

- **“Natural-Appearing”** theme, where visual influences from urban / community land uses are minute or nonexistent;
- **“Transition”** theme, where visual influences from urban / community land uses exist yet are typically minor to moderate, expressing a blended scenic identity of natural appearance and typically subtle human influences; and
- **“Urban/Community”** theme, where human urban / community development is the dominant scenic identity.

Theme areas would be further subdivided into unique “Places”, wherever a unique socially valued scenic image and identity exists. Standards for acceptable levels of Scenic Integrity within each Scenic Character Theme area and each “Place” would be established and applied. Therefore, the standard established for each Scenic Character Theme area and each Place may be above, below, or equal to current conditions. Unlike the current standard for roadway travel units (which is the same for all units) the new threshold standards would vary by Theme area and Place.

The standards for Scenic Integrity would be articulated in three ways; verbally, pictorially, and numerically, as described below.

- **Verbal** descriptions would consist of written definitions of the conditions that meet the threshold standard.
- **Pictorial** descriptions will consist of sets of photographs taken within the Basin that illustrate the conditions associated with each threshold. Several examples of each threshold level would be included. These verbal and pictorial descriptions would provide the public with an easy way to understand reference as to the development conditions considered acceptable in each area.

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- **Numeric** descriptions would simply consist of the numbers 1 through 5 since the proposed system will employ five possible levels of visual dominance and presence of development. The numeric descriptions of the thresholds would be used for future monitoring, making determinations of cumulative threshold attainment for either single or multiple projects, and in the process of permitting specific proposed projects.

One of five levels of Scenic Integrity would be applied to each one of the mapped Theme and Place units throughout the Basin. The five possible levels of this threshold are:

- Scenic Integrity Level 1: undisturbed conditions such as in wilderness areas;
- Scenic Integrity Level 2: development must be visually non-evident;
- Scenic Integrity Level 3: development must appear subordinate or be non-evident;
- Scenic Integrity Level 4: development must appear visually co-dominant or less;
- Scenic Integrity Level 5: development appears visually dominant (and exhibits design and development measures that reflect regionally appropriate design for the Tahoe Basin.
- Scenic Integrity Level 6: development appears visually dominant.

In order to provide sensitivity and flexibility in response to local conditions and needs, the Scenic Integrity threshold standards would be applied to each individual mapped Theme unit and Place in the Basin, but would also apply to specific views that occur within each area. To be considered in attainment, the unit as a whole would exhibit the conditions associated with the prescribed threshold level, and individual views within the unit would also meet the established threshold standard. This would ensure that individual projects meet the threshold and that the cumulative effect of numerous projects within the same unit would also collectively meet the threshold and not be detrimental to scenic quality.

### Scenic Quality Ratings

Scenic Quality Ratings is the current adopted threshold (SR-2) and is an indicator that measures relative scenic quality of an individual scenic resource that can be seen from the scenic travel routes, public recreation areas, and certain designated bicycle trails. This measurement system was developed as a result of a recommendation in the *1982 Threshold Study Report*.

### Methodology

The visible scenic resources are defined to include:

- Views of natural landscapes from the roadway, Lake Tahoe's shoreline, recreation areas and designated bicycle trails;
- Views of the natural landscape along the Lake's shoreline;
- Views to the Lake from the scenic travel routes;
- Views of the mountain ridgeline;
- Views of the Lake and natural landscape from roadway entry points into the Lake Tahoe Basin; and
- Unique regional landscape features such as streams, beaches, and rock formations that add interest and variety in the landscape.

Using the criteria above, the 1982 Threshold Study Report recommended -and TRPA adopted as significant - 202 visible scenic resources visible from the scenic travel routes.

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Additionally in 1993, TRPA adopted significant scenic resources visible from public recreation sites and certain designated bicycle trails.

Each identified resource was numerically rated on four visual quality indicators expressed in terms of low scenic quality (rating of 1) to high scenic quality (rating of 3). The ratings were intended to define comparative scenic quality among the resources rather than identify an absolute scenic quality. The indicators included unity, vividness, and intactness. Scores for each indicator were summed to provide an overall rating. This overall rating defined the adopted threshold standard for Scenic Quality Ratings

### **11.3.2 Current Condition and Trend for Natural Environment**

Currently, scenic quality in the natural forested areas of the Lake Tahoe Basin is at a high to very high level. Management strategies applied on lands in public ownership support naturally-appearing scenic quality. However, in locations defined as “Transition” theme areas a trend of decline in scenic quality has occurred (as shown from monitoring data over the twenty-plus years). This trend has more recently occurred in shoreline areas. Increased urbanization and the trend toward larger residential structures have decreased scenic quality in some areas along the shoreline.

Meanwhile, scenic quality in some urban corridors has dramatically improved through public and private redevelopment efforts where the built environment shows improvement in design and aesthetics. Often, commercial and residential properties are being redeveloped using architectural styles referred to as “Tahoe rustic”, “Old Tahoe”, or “National Park” — styles that are considered regionally appropriate.

### **11.3.3 Technical Range of Feasibility Regarding Natural Environment**

Currently, TRPA scenic threshold standards include:

- Threshold Travel Route Ratings;
- Scenic Quality Ratings;
- Public Recreation Areas and Bike Trails Scenic Quality; and
- Community Design.

The Travel Route ratings, Scenic Quality ratings, and Public Recreation Areas Scenic Quality are all non-degradation standards. They therefore must meet or exceed the numeric rating originally established.

Currently, roadway and shoreline travel units with ratings below 15 and 7.5 respectively must be restored (improved) in order to meet the standard of 15 or 7.5. The standard of 15 applies to every roadway travel unit. The standard 7.5 applies to every shoreline travel unit. (Per the discussion above, this is regardless of a road or shoreline’s inherent characteristics and differences between units.)

The proposed standards would avoid the problem of applying a uniform standard to locations with different conditions. The proposed standards would be tailored to each area based on inherent scenic characteristics and the specific condition that is desired in each area. In this way, the proposed thresholds would be more responsive to the conditions of each area and the area’s ability to provide high scenic quality while allowing specific and realistic goals for scenic quality to be achieved.

Scenic integrity addresses the actual physical nature and extent of disturbance occurring in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Using scenic integrity to measure the visual dominance of

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03-20-07 draft document – for discussion purposes only – do not cite or quote development would provide a true measurement of change in the landscape that is easily quantified and monitored. Additionally, scenic integrity is now used by the USFS in its Scenery Management System, a system that is being applied to federal forest lands in the Basin and nation-wide. This provides a degree of consistency between TRPA and the USFS system that has not previously existed.

### 11.3.4 Proposed Desired Condition and Standards for Natural Environment

#### Proposed Desired Condition for Natural Environment

Scenery viewed from Lake Tahoe and the basin's major roadways, public recreation areas, trails, and urban centers predominantly displays natural appearing forest, meadows, mountains, and the shoreline of Lake Tahoe. Development, where visible, complements the natural setting.

#### Proposed Standard for Scenic Integrity

Maintain or achieve the assigned numerical scenic integrity level rating assigned to each roadway and shoreline unit to achieve the desired condition for scenic resources.  
For all roadway units designated "Urban", maintain a Scenic Integrity Level of 5 or better;  
For all roadway units designated "Transition", maintain a Scenic Integrity Level of 3 or better;  
For all roadway units designated "Natural", maintain a Scenic Integrity Level of 2 or better.

#### Proposed Standard for Scenic Quality Ratings:

Maintain or improve the numeric rating assigned each resource as recorded in the Scenic Resources Inventory. Maintain or improve the numeric rating assigned to each identified scenic resource, as recorded in the *1993 Lake Tahoe Basin Scenic Resource Evaluation*.

## 11.4 DESIRED CONDITION 2: COMMUNITY DESIGN

As discussed above, scenic resource management 1) perpetuates the overall natural-appearing setting and protects the significant scenic features of the Lake Tahoe Basin, and 2) ensures that development, when it does occur, is appropriate for the area in which it is located -- in terms of size, mass, architectural style, and density. The following modified indicator for the built environment is recommended.

### 11.4.1 Proposed Indicator for Community Design

**Proposed Indicator for Community Design: Design and Development**

Implementation of applicable design and development measures (Type II): Height, bulk, texture, form, materials, colors, lighting, signage, and siting.

Community design and aesthetic quality of the built environment continues to be an important element for maintaining scenic quality in the Tahoe Region. Because development either already exists or is anticipated at some level in certain areas in the Lake Tahoe Basin, it is necessary to ensure that when it does occur, development is appropriate in terms of its size, mass, architecture, and density for the area (i.e. landscape type) and reflects the valued visual attributes of the community in which it will be located.

The ideal indicator for community design would be implementation of applicable development and design measures that create and reflect a regionally appropriate design and character for the Lake Tahoe Basin. The design and development measures would be based on accepted elements of design such as height, bulk, texture, form, materials, colors, lighting, signage and siting.

The standard for community design would be based on implementation of the design and development measures at a regional and sub-regional perspective that reflects the regionally appropriate design. The list of specific design elements can be formulated for a region as a whole and for each distinct community that reflects the desired community visual values.

Determination regarding progress with the community design standard would be through measurement of the indicators listed above and would be made by field inspection using a checklist approach.

**11.4.2 Current Condition and Trend for Community Design**

In recent years, the built environment in the Lake Tahoe Basin has shown major improvements in design and aesthetics. Substantial public and private investment in redevelopment is occurring in the Lake Tahoe Basin and, almost without exception, new projects utilize high quality materials and exhibit superior design. Often, commercial and residential properties are redeveloped using architectural styles commonly referred to as “Tahoe rustic”, “Old Tahoe”, or “National Park”.

However, not all redeveloped structures produce positive effects on the scenic quality of the Lake Tahoe Basin or community design thresholds. Decreased setbacks, substantially larger and more massive structures, use of large window area and other reflective materials such as metal roofs, and the use of light-colored exterior siding materials all tend to increase the visual dominance and obtrusiveness of man-made elements. Thus, while an individual new structure may have pleasing and interesting elements, in some cases the cumulative impact of new structures may have negative effects on the area’s natural-appearing character.

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Throughout the Lake Tahoe Basin, public and joint public / private investments in new projects have produced substantial improvements in community character. These projects include several sidewalk / landscaping projects, erosion control and water quality improvement projects, land purchases by public agencies and subsequent removal of decrepit structures. Without exception, these projects have improved the sense of place and functionality of the core community areas. Public leadership in these projects has often encouraged and motivated private investment on nearby properties, expanding the benefits beyond the public project area boundaries.

### 11.4.3 Technical Range of Feasibility Regarding Community Design

The Community Design threshold is a policy statement, which applies to the built environment, and is not restricted to roadways or shoreline units. The policy statement states, “It shall be the policy of the TRPA Governing Board in the development of the Regional Plan, in cooperation with local jurisdictions, to insure the height, bulk, texture, form, materials, colors, lighting, signing and other design elements of new, remodeled and redeveloped buildings be compatible with the natural, scenic and recreational values of the Region.”

Few limitations exist for the use of Design and Development standards as a key indicator. It is relatively easy to require the implementation of development design standards in the project review process. In more sensitive locations, the threshold may require a higher percentage of items contained in the standard be implemented and present in order for the area (or site) to be considered in attainment. In less sensitive locations, the threshold may be set at a lower required percentage.

### 11.4.4 Proposed Desired Condition and Standards for Community Design

#### Proposed Desired Condition for Community Design

Communities of the Lake Tahoe Basin are planned and designed with aesthetic characteristics that respect the local natural systems. Lake Tahoe Basin’s built environment is diverse yet appropriate in scale and style. It helps foster the identity of individual communities and a sense of place.

#### Proposed Standard for Community Design: Community Design Index Level

Implementation of Development and Design Measures (height, bulk, texture, form, materials, colors, lighting, signage, siting and other design elements ) in new, remodeled and redeveloped buildings to be compatible with the natural, scenic, recreation, and community desired visual values for the Region.

Modification to the existing Community Design Standard is proposed. The community design standard will be established based on design and development measures that are appropriate for the region and measured through height, bulk, texture, form, materials, colors, lighting, signage, and siting that have shown to have improved scenic quality and the quality of the built environment. Attainment of this standard by each community will be measured through actual implementation of the design standards.

## 11.5 DESIRED CONDITION 3: DARK SKY

The public has indicated that minimization of night-time light pollution is desired. Due to the complexities of measuring night time lighting it is recommended that a standard not be developed for this desired condition. Although a standard will not be developed, it is recommended that management strategies and design standards be developed and adopted to reduce night time lighting.

### 11.5.1 Proposed Desired Condition for Dark Sky

#### Proposed Desired Condition for Dark Sky

Views of the night sky from the naturally appearing areas of the Lake Tahoe Basin are conducive to star gazing. Light emanating from the built environment is carefully controlled to ensure safety and security without encroaching on the regional dark sky.

## 11.6 FURTHER CONSIDERATIONS REGARDING SCENIC QUALITY

Federal, regional, and local planning policy mandates the conservation of significant scenic resources in the Lake Tahoe Basin. For this purpose a comprehensive scenic management plan has been in place in the Lake Tahoe Basin for over twenty years. The plan has attempted to systematically maintain and improve the quality of one of the most scenic areas in the world, thus helping to assure a healthy tourism economy and healthy natural ecosystem for the future.

Working with the management plan has increased sensitivity to the visual impacts of individual development projects and has resulted in consensus-building solutions at the local level. Examples include completed private and public projects that use both conceptual and specific elements of the scenic resource management plan. Projects include the City of South Lake Tahoe Redevelopment Project, Tahoe City Urban Improvements, and numerous private remodels around the Lake Tahoe Basin in residential and commercial cores.

However the scenic resource management plan is becoming outdated. Recent monitoring data illustrates that that the system has inherent problems and is not sensitive enough to reflect changes in desired community character, new technologies, and natural processes in the landscape. A revised system must provide additional flexibility and respond to community-desired and natural changes in the landscape. Developing and implementing an updated scenic resource management plan is vital to attaining twenty-year visual quality goals in the Lake Tahoe Basin. Scenic resources are highly valued in the Tahoe Basin and are essential to the region's image as one of the world's most memorable places.

Since the first threshold evaluation in 1991, scenic resource professionals have provided substantial comment on the Lake Tahoe Basin's scenic threshold system. These professionals, both on the TRPA staff and noted consultants, concluded that the current system embodies both positive and negative features. On the whole, the current system is difficult to use as a practical planning and implementing tool to assure maintenance of and access to the region's valuable scenic qualities.

The region benefits from a fairly well documented scenic condition, beginning with the first roadway and shoreline travel route ratings produced in 1971 and extending to comprehensive

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In order to revise the scenic system to overcome the limitations of the current system, it is necessary to continue the development of the Scenic Stability Indicator (SSI) as a possible method to preserve valued natural landscape features in the Lake Tahoe Basin. This would require inventorying the existing scenic quality resources and identifying those natural landscape features that are valued attributes and determining how to perpetuate them in the future.