

3.9 SCENIC RESOURCES

3.9.1 INTRODUCTION

This section describes the physical characteristics of the landscape and scenic features and resources that exist in the Lake Tahoe Region, and the regulations that relate to the management of those resources. The potential scenic impacts that would result from implementation of the Regional Plan Update alternatives are identified and assessed, and mitigation measures are recommended for any significant or potentially significant impacts to scenic resources.

The scenic quality of the Lake Tahoe Basin is appreciated by visitors and residents alike as it is viewed from roads, trails, scenic resources such as parks and public beaches, and the surface of Lake Tahoe, while engaged in outdoor activities. Lake Tahoe, the focal point of the Basin landscape, is approximately 22 miles long and 12 miles wide with a surface area of 122,239 acres. The surface of the Lake affords panoramic views of the entire Lake Tahoe Basin.

3.9.2 REGULATORY BACKGROUND

Impacts to scenic resources are regulated by TRPA and at the federal, state, and local levels. Applicable planning documents, codes, ordinances and guidelines relating to scenic resources are described below.

TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY

The two major scenic resource goals of TRPA are to maintain and restore the scenic qualities of the naturally appearing landscape and to improve the accessibility of Lake Tahoe for public viewing (TRPA 2011). These goals are implemented through the Environmental Threshold Carrying Capacities and the Regional Plan.

ENVIRONMENTAL THRESHOLD CARRYING CAPACITIES

The Tahoe Regional Planning Compact (Compact) provides for the development and implementation of Environmental Threshold Carrying Capacities (thresholds). In 1982, the threshold study team completed the Scenic Resource Inventory and evaluation necessary to define and establish threshold standards for preservation of scenic quality. At that time, numerical standards were established for roadway and shoreline travel routes, and roadway and shoreline scenic quality, which are based on a rating scale or numeric standard. Additionally, TRPA adopted a management standard policy statement for overall community design elements. In 1993, TRPA adopted numeric standards for designated public recreation areas and bike trails (TRPA 2007, p. 8-1).

The goals of the Scenic Resources Thresholds are to:

- ▲ Maintain or improve 1982 roadway and shoreline scenic travel route ratings,
- ▲ Maintain or improve views of individual scenic resources, and
- ▲ Maintain or improve quality of views from public outdoor recreation areas.

The four thresholds for scenic resources are outlined below. The TRPA 2006 Threshold Evaluation Report found that positive trends have occurred for all four thresholds between 2001 and 2006 (TRPA 2007, Executive Summary p.12), and that three of the four thresholds, namely Scenic Quality, Public Recreation Areas and Bike Trails, and Community Design, are “at or somewhat better than target,” as reported in the 2011 Threshold Evaluation (TRPA 2012).

CARSON CITY

Guiding Principle #3 of the Carson City Master Plan (adopted July 6, 2006) provides for “Stewardship of the Natural Environment.” This principle includes a goal to protect visual resources in the City. Policies associated with this goal include limitations on hillside development, limiting light pollution on night skies, protecting the City’s visual quality, and maintaining sign controls (Carson City 2006: p. 3-9).

3.9.3 AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

The appearance of the landscape may be changed by forces of nature and human action. In the Lake Tahoe Region, human activity has had a notable influence on the landscape. Beginning with the Comstock era around 1859, demand for timber resulted in extensive logging within the Lake Tahoe Region with large portions appearing virtually deforested by 1890 (Elliot-Fisk et al. 1997). Urban development began in the early 1900s with small vacation resorts and a few communities. After World War II, demand for recreation, tourism, and permanent housing fueled large increases in development. Gaming casinos were built and commercial development increased to become the second largest developed land use next to residential by 2002. Even so, concentrated development in the Region is largely confined to private lands, which make up 10 percent of the land Region-wide compared to 90 percent in public ownership (as indicated by TRPA GIS and Assessor’s data). Today, 90 percent of the privately owned buildable parcels in the Region have already been developed. Thus, while some new development will occur, most new projects involve redevelopment of previously developed sites and transfers of development from one location to another.

VISUAL ENVIRONMENTS

The Lake Tahoe Region contains a mix of environments, including urban centers, residential neighborhoods, small commercial nodes that serve the residential neighborhoods, large-scale recreation areas, and undeveloped stretches of wild and rural landscapes. These elements are described by three general visual environments: urban, rural, and a rural transition environment between the urban and rural areas (TRPA 1989, p. vii).

- ▲ **Urban Areas:** Urban areas are dominated by commercial uses, public service activities, and residential uses (human-made development). Examples include Tahoe City, South Lake Tahoe, Stateline, Kings Beach, and Incline Village.
- ▲ **Rural Transition Areas:** Rural transition areas are a combination of human-made development and natural landscape features. Examples include Round Hill, Zephyr Cove, Christmas Valley, Tahoma, Sunnyside, and Homewood.
- ▲ **Rural Areas:** Rural areas are dominated by natural elements and processes. Examples include Emerald Bay, Luther Pass, and the east shore forests (TRPA 1989: p. vii).

NATURAL FEATURES

The dominant natural features of the Lake Tahoe Region are the expansive alpine lake (Lake Tahoe) ringed by rugged mountain peaks with thickly forested slopes.

LAKE TAHOE

Lake Tahoe is a water feature of remarkable color, clarity, size and depth. Water clarity is noted to approximately 70 feet deep, though the clarity has declined from greater than 100 feet since readings began in the late 1960s (USGS 2008). Lake Tahoe is the second deepest lake in the United States and the tenth deepest in the world, with a maximum depth measured at 1,645 feet. The color of Lake Tahoe’s water is highly variable,

influenced by depth. Water color ranges from clear, light green at the shallow lake edges (especially noteworthy in areas such as Emerald Bay), to dark blue in the deeper areas. The Lake is approximately 22 miles long and 12 miles wide, with 72 miles of shoreline and a surface area of 191 square miles (USGS 2008). The expansiveness of the Lake allows for long-distance views throughout the area.

MOUNTAINS

Distinctive mountain ridges and peaks surround the flat plane of Lake Tahoe and create an enclosed landscape. The Lake Tahoe Basin is ringed by several high mountains rising to elevations up to 10,891 feet at Freel Peak in the Carson Range. The mountains are thickly forested, predominately by evergreen species, and many have rocky summits that maintain patches of snow year-round.

NATURAL VIEWS

Views of the natural scenery are dominant. The clear blue water of the Lake is ringed by rocky shorelines and sandy beaches. Human-made features including marinas, piers, and other structures are also located along the water's edge. Slopes rise from the Lake with a variety of vegetation and rocky outcrops intermingled with streams and waterfalls. Above these slopes, forested mountains climb to high peaks. These views contain a high degree of natural contrast and variety and are generally of high visual quality.

DARK SKIES

Rural and rural transition areas in the Lake Tahoe Basin have dark skies with little light pollution from urban areas, making them ideal locations for astronomical viewing. Views from lakeside beaches and from watercraft on the Lake are especially expansive and free of nighttime light interference. Lighting associated with urban development and human presence can result in light pollution and spillover, which can adversely affect the dark night skies that contribute to the natural scenic character of the Basin.

SCENIC ROADWAYS

In the Lake Tahoe Basin, Eastshore Drive (in Nevada) is designated as a National Scenic Byway. Eastshore Drive is the name given to the combined lengths of US 50 and SR 28 along the eastern shore of Lake Tahoe from the California-Nevada border in the south to the Nevada-California border in the north. Both US 50 and SR 28 are designated as Nevada State Scenic Byways (FHWA 2011b, NDOT 2011). Mt. Rose Highway (SR 431), located in the northern portion of the Lake Tahoe Basin is also designated as a Nevada State Scenic Byway (NDOT 2011).

There are two Officially Designated California State Scenic Highways in El Dorado County and two Eligible State Scenic Highways (not officially designated) in Placer County. In El Dorado County, SR 89 is Officially Designated from the Placer County line to the Alpine County line, while US 50 is Officially Designated from Placerville to the South Lake Tahoe city limit (Caltrans 2010). In Placer County, SR 28 (Caltrans 2009a) and portions of SR 89 (Caltrans 2009b) are Eligible State Scenic Highways.

EXISTING SCENIC QUALITY AND THE BUILT ENVIRONMENT

Systematic monitoring of scenic conditions in the Lake Tahoe Region has been regularly conducted by TRPA since 1982. USFS also monitors scenic conditions throughout the lands it manages. TRPA scenic monitoring data show that, in most cases, scenic quality is highest in areas that have little or no development and that, where development exists, the level of scenic quality depends on the visual character and quality of the built environment and its visual compatibility with the natural landscape. Improvements in scenic quality have resulted primarily where development has been removed or redeveloped.

rate than with Alternatives 1, 2, 4, and 5 as a result of built-in transfers and environmental redevelopment incentives. For these reasons, the impact of Alternative 3 on visual character would be **less than significant**.

ALTERNATIVE 4: REDUCED DEVELOPMENT, INCENTIVIZED REDEVELOPMENT

Alternative 4 seeks to consolidate development in the Lake Tahoe Region within 12 PTOD districts. It would also establish a transect zoning system that would allow for a mix of land uses and housing types, and would regulate development based on the physical form of the built environment. These actions would affect the visual character of the areas involved. The greatest change would likely occur within the 12 PTOD districts. Design standards for new development and redevelopment would be implemented for the PTOD districts that reflect community input. These would serve to guide the character of development in a desirable manner as physical changes to the built environment occur over time. For these reasons, the impact of Alternative 4 on visual character would be **less than significant**.

ALTERNATIVE 5: SIMILAR RATE OF DEVELOPMENT AND REGULATORY STRUCTURE TO THE 1987 REGIONAL PLAN

Alternative 5 would retain existing requirements and types of incentives for development and redevelopment. It would allow more allocations as incentives for new development than the other alternatives, although they would be allocated based on the ratios and rules of the existing Regional Plan. Current design standards and guidelines and limits on building height would be maintained. Any new development or redevelopment project would be subject to TRPA approval including public input and environmental review. As a result, the existing visual character of the region would remain largely unchanged and levels of scenic quality would be maintained or continue to improve slowly as indicated by TRPA scenic threshold monitoring data. For these reasons, the impact of Alternative 5 on visual character would be **less than significant**.

MITIGATION MEASURES

No mitigation is required for any of the alternatives.

Impact 3.9-3	Adversely Affect Nighttime Views In the Region. Outdoor lighting in developed areas is necessary for public safety and security. If not properly controlled, it has the potential to illuminate the night sky and adversely affect nighttime views. The impact of outdoor lighting on nighttime views is considered to be less than significant under Alternatives 1 and 5 and beneficial for Alternatives 2, 3, and 4 because specific measures to control stray light and minimize off-site spillage of light would be required under those alternatives.
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The intent of all alternatives is to set specific requirements for exterior lighting location, height, and shielding to satisfy public safety requirements but minimize off-site spillage and, to the extent feasible, reduce light pollution coming from within the Region. Existing lighting standards currently require only that lights be directed downward and do not specifically require the use of cutoff shields. Changes to Chapter 36.8 of the Code of Ordinances to require the use of cutoff shields would apply to Alternatives 2, 3, and 4. As new development and redevelopment occur, these lighting standards would be implemented. Some light pollution and stray light is now coming from outside the Region, notably from night skiing lights at Squaw Valley Resort; however, control of these sources is outside the authority of TRPA and the scope of this EIS.