

# POLICY AND PLANNING IN THE LAKE TAHOE BASIN: THE CASE OF TRANSPORTATION

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Regional transportation planning given environmental constraints is addressed for the Lake Tahoe Basin of California and Nevada. The inter-relationships of population densities, land use regulations, and existing transportation facilities with future project and system-level transport investments are explored for three development alternatives. The conflicts between technical planning methodology and environmental policy considerations are discussed, and recommendations are made for institutional changes that would allow broader policy considerations and systems alternatives to be evaluated in the planning process. Major freeway projects previously planned for this mountain resort environment are rejected as improper transportation solutions, and greater reliance on local traffic and land use improvements is encouraged in the study findings. Certain aspects of the planning strategies and conceptual solutions are applicable to regional transportation planning efforts elsewhere.

•THE AD HOC planning effort described in this paper was commissioned by a private environmental group made up of concerned residents of the Lake Tahoe Basin. It was administered by a bistate (California-Nevada) planning organization, the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency (TRPA), as a portion of regional planning efforts carried out in 1970-1971. The region is an area of some 500 square miles dominated by one of the largest high-altitude lakes in the world.

Lake Tahoe is surrounded by the Sierra Nevada Mountains and, viewed in the context of its natural setting, is still one of the most attractive areas in the western United States. Because it is so attractive, the basin offers a variety of opportunities for commercial development. However, since the end of World War II, development has advanced to the point that the natural qualities of the lake and the basin are threatened.

An interstate compact of 1969 created the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency whose task was to achieve, through a careful program of planning, an acceptable balance between development and environmental protection. Previously, attempts to devise a management plan and to persuade federal, state, and local agencies and private corporations to cooperate in the implementation of a plan had been largely voluntary. The TRPA promised to be an improvement over previous responses, however, because it was empowered to enforce the plan that it devised. Yet it was grossly underfinanced and faced almost unrealistic deadlines. Thus, outside help was mandatory if planning timetables were to be met.

The findings of the conceptual transportation study reported here conflicted with analyses performed previously by two state highway agencies; these analyses had recommended extensive freeway construction for the region. Instead, conservation-oriented perspectives were introduced, which questioned both the need for such high-capacity facilities and the validity of overall growth assumptions on which such highway planning had been based. At a time when so many highway projects are being challenged

for environmental reasons, this study represents one of the first systems analyses of transportation issues as viewed from an environmental perspective. It offers alternatives to freeway construction through arterial street and traffic signalization improvements, transit investments, innovative land use concepts, and enforcement of traffic restraints.

Technical expertise made available to environmental groups for analysis of systems level planning questions can provide insights into the transportation planning process. Although conflict is often provoked by the introduction of such different perspectives, the means of resolving this conflict may be identified in such a process as well. This case study shows how the critical function of diverse bases for technical information and analysis can aid decision-making for transportation improvement and environmental quality.

Transportation was one of five functional categories of regional planning called for in the Tahoe bistate compact. It was one of the most important categories because of its potential effects on the stimulation or retardation of growth in the region and on the distribution of that growth. Of these planning categories, including land use, conservation, recreation, and public services, transportation has been the most technically sophisticated aspect of regional planning for years (1).

This is due in part to historic accident, funding availability, and procedural requirements linked to the growth and development of federal-aid highway programs. Much land use planning, or at least the associated process of data collection, owes its start to the technical demands of comprehensive transportation planning as specified by federal law for urban areas of 50,000 or more population (2). Although the Lake Tahoe Basin has never qualified as an urban area under such laws, it could be expected to benefit from the technical sophistication of the transportation planning methods developed elsewhere.

But technical sophistication in planning methodology calls for substantial resources of time, money, and expertise—elements all lacking in a rushed and underfinanced planning venture leading to adoption of a regional plan for Tahoe. A substitute strategy of ad hoc conceptual planning, with simplified technical analysis selectively applied, was the best stopgap that this study could employ. In the future, perhaps it would be possible to mount a more thorough transportation analysis at Tahoe to refine the hurried analyses that of necessity had to be undertaken as a first step.

In retrospect, with much of the detail of traffic data and computer modeling set aside, the issues that became highlighted were far different from those that had previously been identified and involved difficult policy choices concerning land use and resource allocation in many portions of the Tahoe basin. Beyond that, they raised a number of challenges to state and federal transportation programs that appear to be needlessly rigid in their choice of technical solutions and needlessly destructive of the environment in their implementation.

The alternatives for transportation planning that were explored for TRPA in 1970 were conceptual and, to a large degree, outside the bounds of accepted technical practice for local, state, and federal agencies with existing responsibilities in the highway planning and construction field. But these very agencies had created the opportunity for such a conceptual review of alternatives by their own demonstrated inability to solve problems by themselves.

Examples of such agency failures, or unresolved dilemmas, included a major and protracted controversy over spanning the scenically outstanding Emerald Bay with a low-level bridge or tunneling through the adjacent mountains for a high-level, four-lane, all-weather route (Calif-89), as well as a more recent controversy within the city of South Lake Tahoe itself (US-50) over meadows or freeway development.

The regional plan for the Tahoe basin that was finally adopted in December 1971 rejected many of the suggestions for freeway-scale facilities in the basin made in previous plans, and it accepted the proposal that a major study effort be undertaken over a 2- to 5-year period, aimed at planning in detail whatever new transportation alternatives might be required to serve the basin population and land use distributions as finally decided on by the 1970-71 regional planning effort. However, because the same highway agencies that had failed earlier to account for the basin's unique environmental

and transportation requirements are responsible for designing the new study, the issues surrounding transportation policy and planning for the basin are far from being resolved.

Political and institutional changes may be required before compatible mobility and environmental solutions can be achieved at Tahoe and elsewhere. The organizational and personal resistance to institutional change is not surprising, at least not to social scientists and practicing politicians. Nevertheless, such resistance must be recognized as limiting to development of new types of transportation policies. Should the technically sophisticated planning that has legitimized predetermined solutions and masked policy choices elsewhere be allowed again to prevail at Tahoe, the opportunity to explore fresh alternatives, which was presented in 1971 by the ad hoc planning effort discussed in this paper, may be lost permanently.

### CONCEPTUAL PLANNING ALTERNATIVES

Most transportation planning in the United States, whether for entire regions or for individual facilities, has commenced with the twin assumptions that travel demands are known or predictable and that they should be accommodated.

The transportation study discussed in this paper from the outset took the form of a policy study that presented political choices, rather than an engineering study that implied technical choices (3, 4).

An extensive and technically complex methodology for traffic estimation, based on land use data, traveler characteristics, automobile ownership patterns, travel times, and other factors has been built up over the past several decades, largely in conjunction with federal highway programs. If present travel, population, and land use characteristics of a region are known, as the theory goes, then future travel demands can be predicted accurately through knowledge of future land uses and anticipated population characteristics (2).

The use of this methodology assumes that substantial amounts of time and other resources are available to gather extensive data, such as inventories of current land use, traffic flows, and population characteristics. And, equally important, the methodology presupposes that land use arrangements and population levels for some future planning horizon are both known and desirable. These assumptions could not be met at the time the transportation study discussed here was begun, even though there existed an interim plan for the Tahoe basin approved by TRPA (5). Simply stated, the interim plan had been approved without any reliable estimates of how many people would use the basin, as either residents or visitors, if the plan were implemented. It was not even known whether the plan was sufficient to provide some of the basic services that the various users of the basin could be expected to demand.

Recognizing the uncertainty of future population estimates, the Advisory Planning Commission (APC) to TRPA decided to undertake a transportation study and requested that three alternative levels of population be investigated: 125,000, 250,000, and 450,000 visitors and residents on a peak summer day in some future but unspecified year. There was no indication of which level was preferred, although because 250,000 was centered between higher and lower population limits the APC might see that level as a desirable and feasible level of basin activity. As it turned out, when population data were being generated for the transportation study by the TRPA staff, present peak summer population already exceeded the 125,000 lower limit (150,000 persons per day at 1970 development levels), and the interim plan zoning allowed for up to 750,000 people if allowable projected dwelling units were built and fully occupied.

Crude data on existing traffic flows and population distribution were improvised from past highway counts made annually by the state highway agencies of California and Nevada and from simple map interpretations. They were good enough for rough judgments on the nature of existing problems and the probable nature of future ones. But an effort at anything more than highly rudimentary quantitative analysis of travel demand would have been totally meaningless. The space limits of this paper preclude detailing the analysis carried out, but this is available in the text and appendixes of the report on which this discussion is based (6).



The second assumption of most previous transportation planning studies was that travel demands should be accommodated through the design and construction of public works. Because much of the regional planning effort under way at Tahoe was directed to the question of how much growth and development could be accommodated in the basin within more or less objective environmental constraints (as well as more subjective constraints based on value judgments about the quality of living and recreational experiences that should be available in the basin), questions relating to transportation needed to be posed in a way that recognized such constraints. Thus, judgments would have to be made on whether projected travel demands should be served if the environmental damage associated with providing new highway facilities was found to be large, at least in certain instances. If demands were not to be served, then population might have to be limited to reduce demand, new modes of travel such as public transit or lake-shore ferries might have to be generated, and less damaging traffic patterns might have to be encouraged through land use and street design in particularly difficult areas such as the Stateline casino/motel area or the fragile topography of Emerald Bay.

Thus, travel demand, no matter how crudely or elegantly computed, would not have attached to it the assumption that has traditionally been implied by such a term as highway needs, namely, the assumption that needs would be met. This is a highly value-laden concept that has previously placed traffic movement above virtually all other criteria in highway investment decisions. Where, how, and how much travel demand could be served, without undue environmental damage, would instead become the basic transportation input to the basin planning study. This approach, encouraged by the League to Save Lake Tahoe study sponsors, promised to highlight rather than obscure the environmental and developmental policy questions that must be faced before more technical transportation decisions are made.

The absence of technical criteria for judging outcomes of such a planning study led to a highly conceptual framework of inquiry and analysis. With so many unknowns, with severe constraints on time and resources, and with advocates of environmental values competing for the future development of the region with those espousing traditional economic interests, an open attempt to raise issues and specify alternatives seemed desirable. The approach chosen by the study team and the TRPA staff, with the consent of the APC, was that of exploring three different transportation policies for Tahoe. The identification of these alternatives was not intended to imply that any one should be viewed as a recommended policy for adoption, nor were the three alternatives presumed to represent the full range of policy options that might be seriously considered for implementation in the basin. Each alternative was chosen to represent a more or less limiting condition of technical and economic feasibility under each of three dominant assumptions:

1. Maintaining the status quo (do-nothing alternative),
2. Constructing the full complement of state and local highways shown on the interim plan (full highway alternative), or
3. Shifting to highly innovative transport modes and land use policies to retain environmental values while increasing personal mobility, but perhaps at the furthest limits of economic cost (innovation alternative).

These three alternatives, which may be thought of as bounding the space of acceptable compromise among environmental integrity for the basin, personal mobility for its residents and visitors, and economic and institutional achievement cost, were to be analyzed within the limitations of available time and data. Each was to be examined in the context of the three population levels that the APC identified. It was hoped that a subsequent study, with more adequate resources and a more narrowly focused charter, could take the transportation element of the Tahoe plan closer to implementation by choosing among the policy alternatives that had been exposed by the conceptual analysis, or some variation thereof, and by recommending actions to achieve a desired outcome.

#### ISSUE IDENTIFICATION AND STUDY FINDINGS

Even the limited technical analysis in this study pointed to weaknesses in existing

institutional and financial arrangements in terms of providing transportation facilities that were compatible with the most modest environmental protection policies. The bulk of the money that might normally become available for transportation projects in the Tahoe region from state and federal sources would be earmarked for freeways of dubious value relative to the mobility problems of the basin. Moreover, funds for other, more local movement systems, which appear most deficient now and into the future, would simply not be available in county and city treasuries at the levels required under any but zero population growth assumptions. Although further, more detailed technical studies might be recommended as part of future transportation planning, it seemed clear that working for fundamental changes in state policies regarding transportation finance and local options would be of vastly greater utility to basin planners than additional engineering analysis. For this reason, among others, the author has been working for the past year as a special consultant to the California legislature on matters of state-wide transportation planning and transit financing policies.

The transportation planning study reached the following major conclusions in December 1970.

1. The Lake Tahoe interim plan was wholly inadequate in its planning for transportation facilities for populations projected from allowed zoning densities. Furthermore, reliance on a system of regional high-speed highways was inappropriate for almost any future population distribution.

2. The state legislatures of California and Nevada were responsible for dealing with the impasse caused by the complex issues of transportation-environment interaction. New authority or flexibility in dealing with parkway planning, revenue sharing with local jurisdictions for arterial and transit finance, and related matters of special transportation charges and land use acquisition would be needed for creative resolution of the conflicts inherent in the Tahoe situation.

3. The planning for all state highways within the basin, including those already subject to freeway agreements between state agencies and the counties, should be subjected to review during a 2- to 5-year period under the requirements of legislation that emphasizes the simultaneous consideration of community values, aesthetic values, regional transportation requirements, and location decisions in the selection of state highway routes.

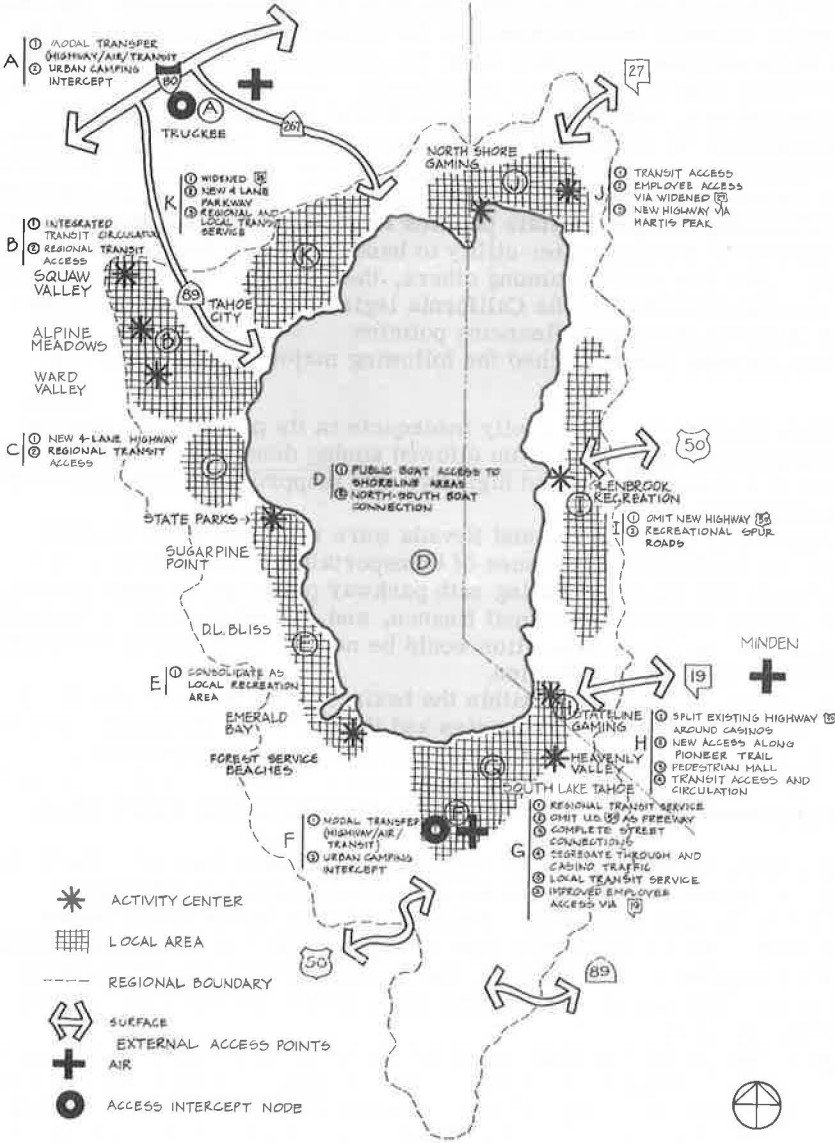
4. Local jurisdictions, whether county or city, did not and would not have the funds available to pay for the needed transportation improvements under any alternative studied, including the do-nothing alternative, unless population levels were substantially reduced from those allowed by interim plan zoning. Without new sources of funds for the provision of transportation services, it seemed unlikely that the basin could provide travel facilities for more than a peak daytime population of 250,000, one-third of that allowed by the interim plan.

5. The principal traffic problems within the basin arose from a mixing of local and regional traffic and a lack of adequate local facilities. Existing highways could handle as much as double the current basin population if a limited number of arterial streets were built in certain critical areas. An investment of \$25 to \$50 million would be required to adopt this status quo alternative.

6. Costs for the full highway and innovation alternatives were each over \$300 million and required difficult-to-come-by institutional and financial changes. Such investments would be required, however, if basin population growth was not to be limited. The innovation alternative, while no less expensive than the full highway investment, would produce less environmental impact and equal or better mobility.

Of these conclusions, perhaps those relating to the state legislature and the state freeway and expressway system of California stood out as most significant at the time of the study. They remain so today, although some changes in state law have begun to recognize the need for greater local flexibility in transportation programs, and more may soon be on the way. Problems similar to those at Tahoe have begun to be recognized in the heavily urbanized regions of California, and the Tahoe region may find powerful allies in future attempts to secure the funding and program flexibility to construct and operate new types of transportation facilities. These needed legislative and

Figure 1. An innovative transportation concept for the Lake Tahoe region.



administrative changes are beginning to be so widely recognized that it now seems likely that they will come about within the 1975 to 1980 period suggested above. Certainly the prospects for such changes in 1974 are substantially brighter than they were in 1970.

### AN EXPANDED SET OF POLICY CHOICES

The many policy choices that become available in transportation and land use planning when the narrow focus on state-financed freeways is expanded are shown in Figure 1. They range from intercepting basin visitors at the perimeter of the region and transferring them to transit vehicles for much of their travel within the region, to redesigning the congested Stateline area at the south shore to bypass through traffic and to provide a central mall for pedestrians and transit vehicles.

An essential point in the analysis of travel behavior (both present and future) underlying these concepts was the consideration of travel in four distinct categories, rather than simply as traffic whenever it occurred. People take trips of varying lengths and for varying purposes, and knowledge of the trip lengths and purposes is important in formulating transportation and land use plans. Travel was divided into four general categories for the purposes of this study: (a) activity center travel, (b) local area travel, (c) regional travel, and (d) external access travel. These are shown schematically in Figure 1.

Activity centers are relatively small, intensely developed areas of specialized activity, such as gaming centers, specific ski areas, state parks or beaches, and the like. Movement to or within them may have characteristics that can be controlled or aided as much by the design of the area as by transportation facilities themselves. Local areas are defined as relatively large recreational or urbanized areas where considerable traffic of modest trip length, say 5 to 10 miles, may circulate for a variety of purposes such as shopping, visiting friends, or traveling from home to work. The city of South Lake Tahoe or urbanized portions of the north shore might serve as examples of local areas that generate considerable traffic that remains within their area. Regional travel is a term denoting longer trips that remain, however, entirely within the basin. Trips such as those from Tahoe City to South Lake Tahoe or entirely around the lake for sightseeing fall into this category. Travel to and from the region, such as from San Francisco or Carson City to South Lake Tahoe, or even traffic through the region on the way to points east and west falls in the last category.

Possible policies for dealing with both the shortest and the longest trips categorized above were treated at some length in the study. Examples of concepts useful for dealing with these traffic categories and treating them so that they do not interfere with local and regional travel are illustrated later.

The local and regional questions had to do with the mixed use of highway facilities by both short and long trips, a rather common phenomenon. The greatest need, both current and projected, was for local circulation, not high-speed regional travel. Yet the funding available for highway and street improvements was heavily biased toward regional highways, often in environmentally fragile areas; minimal funds were earmarked for urbanized portions of the region. Analysis showed a substantial need to reorient these priorities if even present levels of population were to be served well. Space limitations forbid inclusion of the details of the analysis leading to these conclusions.

Figure 2 shows an access intercept concept. If, for example, basin planners wanted to reduce visitors' dependence on the private automobile, large parking areas could be provided at several strategic entry points, with campgrounds and a variety of shopping and other facilities nearby. A transit system could be provided for access to most of the points of recreational interest at the north and south ends of the lake as shown by the cross-hatched areas. Casinos, ski areas, lakeshore, and hiking trails could all be made easily accessible by transit, which would reduce the need for parking at these recreational attractions and heavy automobile traffic between them. Residents, motel visitors, and those with less popular recreational destinations would not necessarily be limited in their travel.

Innovative, small vehicle transit systems that might lead to economical and enjoy-

Figure 2. Access intercept concept for reducing highway dependence.

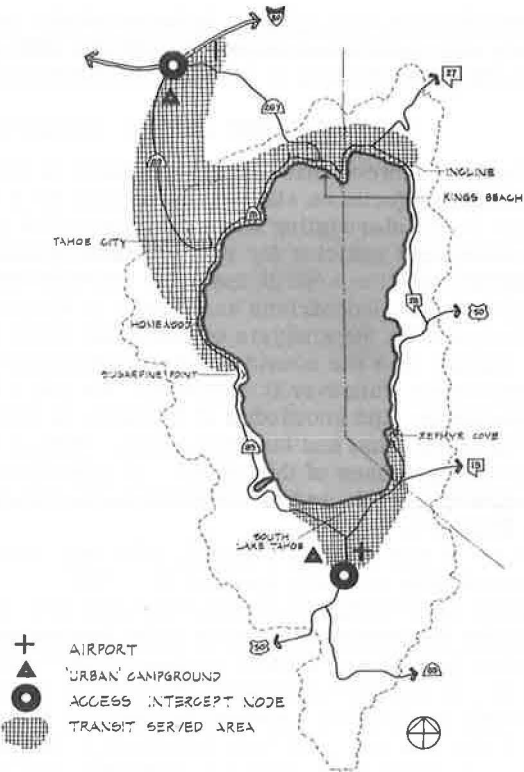
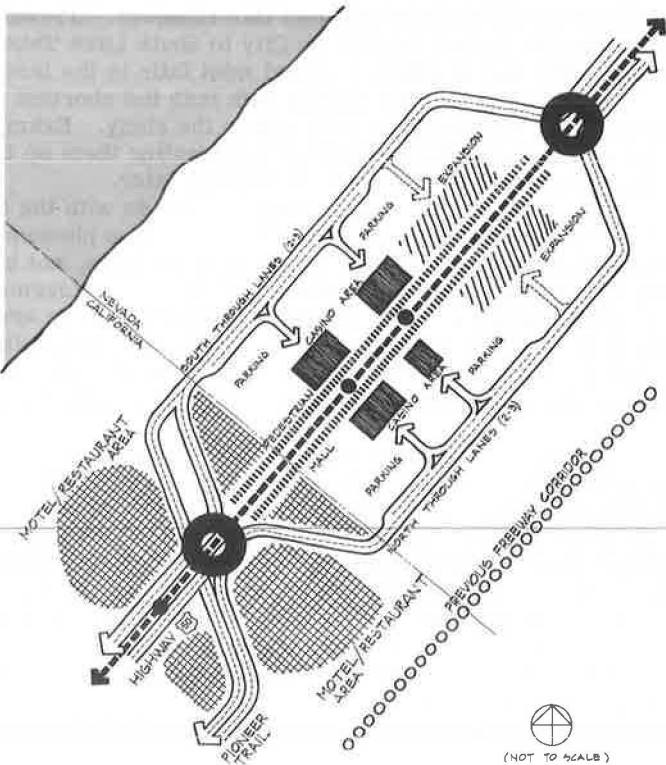


Figure 3. Circulation detail for Stateline area.





able public transport in an environmentally sensitive area such as the Tahoe basin are within the realm of possibility. The concept is of transit vehicles of eight to 20 passenger capacity operating automatically at frequent intervals on their own exclusive right-of-way. This is distinct from either rail rapid transit, which is likely to be too expensive, or buses, which are likely to lack the excitement and novelty to attract much patronage without strongly restrictive measures on automobile use. Although few such systems are yet in operation, and those mostly in airports, there are a number of installations planned within the next few years, and continuing programs of research and development exist in several countries (7). Even now, buses are being used extensively in Yosemite National Park for local transportation in conjunction with restrictions on automobile use to preserve the environment.

Another idea examined in the transportation planning study was the return of public boat service to Lake Tahoe. This had at one time been an important link between Tahoe City and the southern lakeshore areas.

The congestion problem might also be solved by means far short of new freeway construction involving the physical redesign of localized transportation facilities at State-line on the south shore. Figure 3 shows how a new access route of modest size, together with redesign of existing US-50 around, rather than through, the casino area could eliminate a difficult bottleneck. Transit and pedestrian improvements, plus special parking lanes, would also be part of the remedy. To argue, instead, that a new freeway the entire length of South Lake Tahoe is needed to get traffic through this area is perhaps to fire a cannon at a mouse.

Virtually none of the actions suggested in the preceding discussion of innovative transportation-land use concepts could be taken by a federal, state, or local agency acting alone. Policy choices such as these would have to be taken in a cooperative spirit by numerous agencies, some of which may have only peripheral interests in transportation, or in land use planning for that matter. This is perhaps the most difficult problem of all. It is hard enough to break out of the conceptual limits that often block creative planning thought, but to break out of the institutional limits that impede the implementation of new ideas will be even harder.

## OUTCOMES AND PROSPECTS

Although the aim of the transportation planning study discussed in this paper was not to make recommendations for or against specific transportation facilities, it bore heavily on a number of TRPA decisions related to the adoption of a regional plan for the basin. Perhaps the most significant of these was the deletion from the plan of most freeway mileage shown in the interim plan and other previous regional plans (8). Although the California highways will be included in the state freeway and expressway system until the legislature takes action to delete them, the local act of removing them from plans suggests that much more convincing evidence will be required from state agencies in the future to demonstrate that freeway construction is justified. As much as \$200 million in state and federal construction funds would have been earmarked for these projects. It is hoped that a major portion of such funds can be used for other transportation facilities in the basin.

Recommendations in the transportation sections of the adopted regional plan for increased future reliance on local transit alternatives and for ferry service on the lake draw also from the general discussion of the transportation planning study. However, the details of such policies and the means for their implementation have not been spelled out as yet in work performed by either the TRPA or others responding to its guidance. Further studies and implementation strategies must be prepared in the next few years if anything other than an impasse in transport investment is to develop in the basin.

In a time of mobilized, articulate citizen protest and paralyzed, unresponsive state transportation agencies, it is becoming a relatively easy matter to stop a badly conceived highway project; but it is quite another matter to shift direction and move toward alternative solutions acceptable to all the parties involved. The transportation situation in the Tahoe region, past, present, and future, is a reflection of larger forces and

dilemmas in transport policy and planning that have begun to paralyze the states and the nation. These dilemmas cannot be miraculously escaped at Tahoe alone, but must be resolved by legislative and administrative action in Sacramento, Carson City, and Washington, D.C. However, based on the Tahoe experience, some suggestions can be made on what those new legislative and administrative actions ought to look like to give more effective solutions a fair chance.

The release of state and federal funds for modes of travel other than highways is a fairly recent development. The proper amounts, sources, and administration of such funds pose questions that are unlikely to be resolved for perhaps another 3 to 10 years. But enough already has been done to indicate that even modest flexibility in the use of transportation money may greatly increase the range of choices available to local jurisdictions in the next decade. It is thus important that planners at Tahoe and elsewhere recognize that alternatives to freeway construction can become real prospects if perseverance and planning take these possibilities into account now.

A major transportation planning effort of several years' duration has been initiated by the TRPA with the cooperation of the Nevada and California highway agencies. Because the information and policy direction needed for a detailed assessment of transportation alternatives for the region were not available prior to adoption of the regional plan in late 1971, only the broadest outline of the transportation element of the regional plan, using inputs from both the study discussed here and other limited efforts by TRPA, had been prepared by TRPA. The new study will be a test of TRPA's ability to push toward an expanded set of policy and planning choices of the kind outlined.

However, problems may mar the near-term prospects for success in this endeavor and thus make it difficult to realize the more flexible and responsive transportation alternatives that should become available in future years. Although projects such as US-50 through South Lake Tahoe have been temporarily stopped and population levels for the basin may stay substantially below the high numbers originally feared in 1970-1971, the flexibility of providing alternative amounts and types of transport facilities for the region is still largely absent.

At the regional level of planning the transportation study now getting under way seems to focus on the same types of data inventories and computer models that have so obscured transportation policy issues in the past. Rather than break with a past, unsuccessful tradition of transportation planning in urban areas, the new study appears to continue it. Perhaps the traditions and institutional biases of the state highway agencies that helped to write the study work program are too strong to break. At the very least it is evident that TRPA planners and basin residents and visitors will have to exercise great care to see that policy questions are not again hidden by the flurry of new data collected and by the analyses performed as part of this new study.

The creation of the California Department of Transportation, as well as divisions of mass transportation and transportation planning, may help to ensure that regional transportation planning studies attain a more balanced outlook in the future. However, this reorganization should be viewed with cautious optimism inasmuch as the staff commitment to highways is on the order of 18,000 employees and that for public transportation is but 25. But the times will continue to change, and the realistic implementation of alternatives may become a reality before the 1980s. It will take strong action by state legislatures and the public in the next few years, however, to make it so.

The requirement that a new state transportation plan be written for California and its regions may provide additional leverage for ensuring that broader issues than road capacity and safety are addressed. This state plan and its regional elements must be prepared and approved by 1976, which is probably a useful target date for completion of the detailed TRPA transportation plan.

If major decisions on the policy thrust of the regional transportation plan and on specific projects within the basin are brought to focus between now and 1976, it is conceivable that the funds and implementing organizations necessary to translate plans into practice may have become sufficiently flexible to permit realization of at least some of the suggestions advanced in the study that the League to Save Lake Tahoe supported in 1970.

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