

3.9 RECREATIONAL TRAVEL

EXISTING RECREATIONAL TRAVEL SETTING

Placer County is home to recreational areas and activities that thrill, entertain, relax, and reinvigorate local residents as well as visitors from nearby and tourists from afar. For many, Placer County's natural, outdoor recreation setting is the defining characteristic of the region. The area's recreational offerings benefit the community socially as well as economically.

Recreational Attractions & Destinations

Recreational travelers and tourists within and through Placer County are drawn by a diversity of assets which include the area's endowment of lakes, rivers, and parkland; year-round recreational activities; world-class sports facilities; the historic Gold Country; and a multitude of arts, events, and educational opportunities. Placer County seems to have something for almost every outdoor recreational activity: golf, skiing, snowboarding, ice skating, rock climbing, hiking, camping, fishing, boating, swimming, whitewater sports, endurance sports, mountain biking, paved bike trails, horseback riding, hunting, recreational mineral collecting (gold panning), snow mobiling, bungee jumping, hot air ballooning, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation.

One of the biggest recreational draws is the Lake Tahoe Basin. Lake Tahoe's North Shore and Western Shore are in Placer County and are characterized by permanent and seasonal homes, visitor accommodations, and other commercial development. In 1994, housing in the Lake Tahoe Region was occupied by 49 percent permanent residents, and 51 percent seasonal residents; of this housing, TRPA estimated that 18 percent of resident households and 38 percent of the visitor households are in Placer County (*Placer County General Plan Background Report*, Volume I, August 16, 1994). Top rated ski resorts and golf courses draw tourists to Placer County. The Sierra Nevada Mountains have the largest concentration of world-class ski resorts in the western United States. For example, Squaw Valley USA hosted the 1960 Olympics and hosts the National Alpine Championships.

Recreational Travel Characteristics

Visitors (i.e. tourists) travel to and within Placer County for a variety of recreational activities and attractions that are dispersed throughout the county. The land's three distinct geographical areas, Valley/Foothills, Gold Country, and the High Country, attract visitors year-round. Although recreational travel/tourism is significant in all three areas, experience and empirical data shows that the majority of recreational trips are destined for the North Lake Tahoe area in the High Country.

According to surveys taken from 1996 to 1998,¹ the majority of visitors to the North Lake Tahoe area come from the San Francisco Bay Area and other states. Visitors from these two areas comprised 71% of the wintertime visitors and 68% of the summertime visitors. (Of wintertime survey respondents, 43% came from the S.F. Bay Area, and 28% came from another state; in the summertime, it was 36% and 32%, respectively.) Visitors coming from the Greater Tahoe/Sierra Nevada area comprised only 3% each season. Visitors coming from all other parts of California comprised 21% (winter) and 25% (summer) of those surveyed. The remaining 5% (winter) and 6% (summer) of visitors were international.

The majority of recreational trips in Placer County are ski trips to the North Lake Tahoe area in the wintertime. Historically, the Saturdays of the Martin Luther King, Jr. and Presidents' Day holiday weekends (in January and February, respectively) are the highest peak volumes of the year.² Based on the 1996-1998 surveys, 59% of the wintertime visits to North Lake Tahoe were for skiing. Visiting family/friends was a distant second reason, comprising 10% of wintertime trips. In the summertime, the top reason that out-of-state visitors came to North Lake Tahoe was to attend conventions or seminars. The top reasons that visitors came from the Bay Area to visit were rest and relaxation (19%) and visiting family/friends (18%).

Recreational Trips & Traffic

Travel by personal automobiles and recreational vehicles are the predominant means of transport for tourism and recreation both statewide and within the region. Thus, recreational travel relies primarily on state, regional, and local roadways. Even when traveling by air, most visitors also incorporate a private or rental automobile in their travel. The 1996-1998 surveys found that 97% of visitors from the Bay Area traveled to the North Lake Tahoe area by car, and 2% by commercial or chartered aircraft. Twenty-two percent of out-of-state visitors came by car and 77% came by commercial or chartered aircraft. Although much less utilized, other modes include regional and local transit service, rail, and bicycling.

Besides supporting recreational travel for destinations within the county, Placer County provides routes for tourists to connect to other destinations, such as South Lake Tahoe, Sacramento, Reno, and San Francisco. For millions of recreational travelers each year, Placer County serves as a travel-through route rather than a destination. For example, according to the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) records for 2001, seven million non-resident vehicles entered the county at the California Welcome Center located at the Foresthill exit on Interstate-80, signifying the large volume of visitor traffic that passes through the county each year. For county residents working in the recreation and tourism industry, recreational destinations are also employment destinations. Therefore, high volume recreational travel routes can have an associated commuter use.

¹ Intercept surveys cited in the *North Lake Tahoe Tourism and Community Investment Master Plan*, Nolan Rosall, RRC Associates, August 7, 2003.

² *North Tahoe Regional Traffic Management Plan*, LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc., February 19, 2003.

Peak traffic congestion times in the North Tahoe area are highly correlated to seasonal recreational travel (as opposed to daily commuter travel), and occur within relatively limited time periods. According to the *North Tahoe Regional Traffic Management Plan*³, peak traffic congestion occurs predominantly during ten peak weekends and holidays in the winter, and during approximately eight weeks in the summer. Winter weather conditions also contribute to traffic delays. For example, Caltrans chain control checkpoints (for Donner Summit) and interstate closures, which are indispensable for driver safety, can cause some traffic congestions and delay. During the peak seasons, traffic congestion and delay is common along portions of all the regions major roadways.

To alleviate these congestion conditions, the County, Caltrans, and/or private businesses (e.g. ski resorts and lodging operations) set up independent traffic control programs. For example, winter traffic control programs are put in place at the Tahoe City “Wye” (intersection of State Routes 89 and 28); at Alpine Meadows Road/State Route 89; at Squaw Valley Road/ State Route 89; and at Northstar Drive/ State Route 267. In the summer, a traffic control program is put in place on State Route 89/28 at Fanny Bridge. According to the *North Tahoe Regional Traffic Management Plan*, much of the existing peak traffic delay experienced along Interstate 80 and State Routes 89, 28, and 267 can be attributed to peak traffic volumes generated from ski area parking lots that cannot be accommodated adequately (i.e. without long delays) by the available roadway capacity. Another significant congestion spot is Fanny Bridge, which carries State Route 89 over the Truckee River. This is the sole northern access to Lake Tahoe’s West Shore, and is second only to Interstate 80 for level of traffic volumes in the North Tahoe/Truckee region. Fanny Bridge is a tourist spot in its own right, known for its views of fish passage in the Truckee River. The combination of pedestrian, automobile, and bicycle traffic contributes to traffic congestion and delays. During peak times it is not uncommon for northbound traffic queues to extend over three miles, generating delays of up to an hour or more.

Recreational travel to Placer County is also done by rail. Two Amtrak trains serve Placer County: the Capitol Corridor and the California Zephyr. The Capitol Corridor train route runs from San Jose in Santa Clara County to Auburn in Placer County, and includes stops around the San Francisco Bay Area, Davis, and Sacramento. Within Placer County the Capitol Corridor train stops at stations in Roseville and Rocklin as well as Auburn. Amtrak/Capitol Corridor feeder bus service offers connections east to Grass Valley/Nevada City, Colfax, Truckee, and on to Reno; north to Redding; and loops south from Sacramento to South Lake Tahoe and on to Carson City. Through the Capitol Corridor route, Placer County offers direct connections to many recreational and tourist destinations in the region, as well as offers rail access for visitors coming to Placer County. The Capitol Corridor is also an established train for business travelers and students traveling between the S.F. Bay Area, the University of California, Davis, the state capital, and adjacent areas.

Amtrak’s California Zephyr route travels from Emeryville to Chicago, and stops in Placer County at Roseville and Colfax. Major stops outside Placer County include Sacramento, Reno, Salt Lake City, Denver, Omaha, and finally Chicago’s historic Union Station. The Zephyr is used primarily for recreational travel.

³ *North Tahoe Regional Traffic Management Plan*, LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc., February 19, 2003.

Recreational Travel Economic Impacts

Tourism and recreational travel are an integral part of the regional economy, contributing millions of dollars to the Placer County economy each year. Recreational travel and tourism data for the North Lake Tahoe area were collected and reported in *The Economic Significance of Travel to the North Lake Tahoe Area: 1997-2002 Detailed Visitor Impact Estimates* (Dean Runyan Associates, December 2003), prepared for the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association.

The report found that visitors to the North Lake Tahoe Area spent \$355 million in 2002. Visitors spent \$128 million on recreation alone and approximately \$75 million each on lodging accommodations; restaurants, retail purchases, and miscellaneous services. These visitors' expenditures generated approximately \$8.2 million in local tax receipts (sales and transient occupancy taxes) and \$9.3 million in state tax receipts (sales, gasoline, business, and personal income taxes).

In 2002, tourism in the North Lake Tahoe Area generated, directly and indirectly, approximately 71% (over 6,900) of the area's jobs, representing approximately two-thirds (\$178.4 million) of the area's income earnings. Tourism directly generated 5,000 jobs (\$111 million in earnings), primarily in leisure industry businesses such as restaurants, lodging, and recreation providers – primarily the area's ski resorts. Visitor spending indirectly generated an additional 1,900 jobs, including over 1,000 jobs in visitor-related construction and real estate activity (\$38 million in earnings).

Based on surveys of visitor perceptions, traffic congestion has a negative impact on economic growth in recreational travel and tourism. Past surveys indicate that congestion is one of the reasons that tourism is not growing in relation to population growth.⁴

RECREATIONAL TRAVEL NEEDS ASSESSMENT

The following lists the key areas of concern for recreational travel needs in Placer County (listed in no particular order):

- Providing timely and accurate information about road and traffic conditions, particularly in winter;
- Providing options to driving private/personal car;
- Increasing use of transit services (e.g. buses, rail, shuttles), especially by visitors (tourists) and commuters in the recreation/tourism industry;
- Providing an intermodal transit center in the North Tahoe area;
- Providing shuttle service to/from airports to reduce use of rental cars;

⁴ *Placer County General Plan - Background Report*, Volume I, August 16, 1994.

- Ease recreational travel congestion on Interstate 80 within the constraint of not expanding roadway;
- Ease episodic recreational travel congestion by increasing shifts to off-peak travel;
- Improving access into and within the region for all modes of recreational travel, which attracts many local and out-of-region visitors.

RECREATIONAL TRAVEL ACTION PLAN

Short and Long Range

1. Promote and use intelligent transportation systems (ITS) to improve recreational travel. *(PCTPA, Caltrans, SACOG, TRPA, FHWA)*
2. Work with SACOG and other regional partners to implement and expand the 511 traveler information system (electronic information system) so it can be used to provide accurate and timely information on roads, traffic, transit, and alternative routes. *(SACOG, Caltrans, PCTPA, transit operators)*
3. Provide education and marketing of alternatives to the personal automobile. *(PCTPA, employers, resorts, TNT TMA, transit operators)*
4. Expand the availability of options (transit, rail, bike, pedestrian, airport shuttles) to driving the personal (private or rental) automobile. *(transit operators, PCTPA, jurisdictions, Capitol Corridor, employers, resorts)*
5. Provide coordinated feeder transit services to parks and attractions. *(transit operators, resorts, employers, Caltrans)*
6. Coordinate transportation planning with the tourism and resort industry to cooperatively develop, recommend, and implement transportation-related programs for improving recreational travel. *(resorts, employers, Caltrans, TNT TMA, transit operators)*

RECREATIONAL TRAVEL PROJECTS

While there are not projects listed in the RTP as specific only to travel for recreation, there are a variety of projects that support improvements to recreational travel including those in the transit, rail, non-motorized, and ITS sections of the Action Element.