



A housing complex dedicated to local workers is pictured at Summit County, Colorado. Similar projects could be built at Tahoe.
COURTESY/HEIDI HILL DRUM

Priced out

Tahoe housing

Momentum is gaining in an effort to address a steadily growing problem across the Lake Tahoe Basin—a lack of affordable housing for the area’s workforce.

Simply put, the idea is to remove obstacles that stand in the way of Tahoe’s vital service industry workers being able to obtain affordable housing in the same communities in which they work.

“This is a huge problem across the region,” said Heidi Hill Drum, chief executive officer for the Tahoe Prosperity Center, a nonprofit organization established to encourage economic prosperity among Lake Tahoe’s communities.

In April 2018, the Prosperity Center kicked off an ambitious plan to deal with Tahoe’s worsening housing crisis, the Housing Tahoe Partnership. Thus far, the partnership has focused on Tahoe’s south shore communities of South Lake Tahoe and Stateline, but the hope is to expand to the north shore communities of Incline Village and Crystal Bay in Washoe County, Hill Drum said.

Another group, the Mountain Housing Council, is working in tandem to address the housing issue at Tahoe’s California north shore communities of Tahoe City and Kings Beach, as well as in Truckee.

The cost of housing has steadily risen across Tahoe for years, placing it out of reach for many workers. These include those employed by the area’s ski resorts this time of year, but really no corner of the area’s service industry is unaffected. Another key factor is the growing number of units that are owned as second homes. They sit vacant for much of the year or are rented only for brief periods to vacationers.

“I think we’ve all known it’s been a problem for years, but it’s being felt very severely now,” she said.

In 2015, an economic study concluded that the ratio of Tahoe’s housing costs compared to wages outpaced even San Francisco’s. Numbers were updated in 2017, concluding only 21 percent of residents could afford the median price of a home. Experts also found that some 300 Tahoe families were living in motel rooms.

And in 2016, some 500 business owners were interviewed for the Workforce Tahoe Report.

“The number one issue was ‘We can’t find workers because housing is so expensive,’” Hill Drum said. “That was the number one complaint we heard.”

The Housing Tahoe Partnership was formed in response to the problem. Partners include Vail Resorts—owner of Heavenly Mountain Resort, Northstar California and Kirkwood Mountain Resort. Others include Lake Tahoe Community College and Barton Memorial Hospital. All need to improve housing options for employees.

Some positive steps have already been made, including recent actions by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency and South Tahoe Public Utility District to alter regulations to make affordable housing projects more feasible for developers.

Much of the problem could be addressed by razing some of Tahoe aging motels and replacing them with quality affordable housing projects, Hill Drum said.

Another need is to establish a regional housing authority to act as a “champion” in addressing the issue, she said. Both El Dorado and Douglas counties are served by existing housing authorities, but they generally aren’t active at Tahoe due to regulatory challenges there.

There’s also talk of a possible ballot question in 2020 to establish a transfer tax on sales of homes valued in excess of \$500,000 to possibly establish a “robust source of funding” to help tackle the problem.

“We would like to find a good way for government and businesses to work better together on this,” Hill Drum said. “There’s no one solution to this. We’re working on a variety of different solutions.” □

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