

## 6.10 Recreational Travel

This chapter documents recreational travel and tourism data for Placer County and transportation facility needs and services to accommodate this important segment of travel.

### EXISTING RECREATIONAL TRAVEL SETTING

Placer County is home to recreational areas and activities that 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.

Much of the recreational travel and tourism data for Placer County collected and reported in this chapter is derived from the *Placer County Travel Industry Assessment and Detailed Economic Impact Estimates 2002 - 2008p*, prepared by Dean Runyon Associates (March 2009) for the Placer County Office of Economic Development, Placer Valley Tourism, Placer County Visitors Bureau, and the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association.

#### Visitor Regions

Three distinct "visitor" regions can be found in Placer County – The Valley, Gold Country, and High Country. Each contains a rich resource of diverse attractions.

The Valley comprises the westernmost reaches of the county including lands on the Sacramento Valley floor up to the low foothills of the Sierra Nevada range. The area is largely comprised of three cities: Lincoln, Rocklin, and Roseville. The Valley has been marketing "lifestyle" tourism, principally team sports and recreation venues, supported by high quality shopping, dining, gaming, and golf and lodging facilities.

The Gold Country region comprises the foothills of the Sierra-Nevada from just below the City of Auburn up to the High Sierra snow-belt. The Gold Country possesses a wide range of recreation opportunities from dispersed outdoor activities, touring to agricultural and leisure destinations and festivals, cultural and heritage attractions including historic town sites, and arts events and galleries.

The High Country comprises the western slopes of the High Sierra, the Lake Tahoe Basin, and adjacent alpine destinations. Lake Tahoe and the surrounding alpine environment is an internationally-known destination.

The Placer County recreation and tourism industry has three primary marketing organizations supporting the visitor regions: Placer Valley Tourism (PVT), the Placer County Visitors Bureau (PCVB) and the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association (NLTRA). Secondary organizations that promote tourism and recreational travel to Placer County include: cities, chamber of commerce's, downtown merchants associations, Placer Grown, Placer Arts, Sierra Gateway

Business Association, Sierra Nevada Arts Alliance, hospitality sector tourism businesses, lodging, retail and restaurants, team sports organizations, not-for-profit organizations, destination resort companies, recreation providers

## **Existing 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; numerous opportunities for year-round outdoor recreational activities; natural, scenic wonders; world-class competitive sports venues; the historic Gold Country; family-owned wineries; cut-your-own Christmas tree farms; a multitude of arts and unique cultural festivals; conferences and events, educational opportunities; and for gaming enthusiasts casino gambling.

Placer County seems to have something for almost every outdoor recreational activity: winter opportunities - skiing, snowboarding, snow mobiling, ice skating, snow tubing and sleigh riding; summer opportunities - golf, rock climbing, hiking, camping, fishing, boating, swimming, water-skiing, river rafting, endurance sports, mountain biking, paved bike trails, horseback riding, hunting, recreational mineral collecting (gold panning), , bungee jumping, hot air ballooning, and off-highway vehicle (OHV) recreation

Diverse natural areas include Lake Tahoe, Tahoe National Forest, Folsom Lake State Recreation Area, the Auburn State Recreational Area, the American River Canyon, and the Bear River. There are over 3000 campgrounds and Recreational Vehicle (RV) sites in Placer County. There are also sites available at private campgrounds, RV parks, and lands and reservoirs managed by water purveyors. The U.S. Forest Service and California State Department of Parks and Recreation manage over one-third of the camping sites, with convenient access to numerous outdoor recreation activities such as fishing, boating, and hiking. The High Country with a larger portion of publicly managed land has the highest number of campgrounds. In contrast, the Valley and Gold Country's campsites are more oriented to RV campgrounds.

Currently, 12 active family owned and operated wineries and vineyards can be found in Placer County. Most of the vineyards existing today were started in the late 1990s, and became wineries in the early 2000's. Placer County wineries are notable in that a very high proportion of wine production is sold on site or otherwise in restaurants and retail establishments throughout the County. Visitors to Placer County are a primary source of wine sales. Marketing events, such as the Placer Hills Winery Tour, and through the Placer Wine and Grape Association, enhance Placer County as a popular travel destination. Nearly all offer wine tasting and tours by appointment, though on-site visitor facilities are limited. Placer County adopted in September 2008 a winery ordinance regarding allowable activities for winery operations such as public visits, tasting, sales and tours.

Placer County's gaming industry began when The United Auburn Indian Community opened the *Thunder Valley Casino* in unincorporated Placer County near Lincoln, in June 2003, attracting thousands of visitors, most notably, from the Sacramento region and the San Francisco Bay Area. Today the casino offers a variety of gaming, entertainment, dining, and lodging

opportunities. Future development plans include a 400-room hotel and multipurpose entertainment center and will become the largest resort facility in the County.

There are a wide variety of lodging accommodations found in Placer County, distributed through hotels, motels, beds and breakfast inns, rented condominium villages and single family vacation homes. As of 2009, the largest accommodations (defined as 50 units and above) are distributed as follows: in the Valley there are 2256 rooms, with Thunder Valley Casino, near Lincoln, the largest resort; in the Gold Country there are 494 rooms; and in the High Country, there are 1705 rooms, with the Resort in Squaw Valley the largest.

One of the biggest recreational draws in Placer County is the Lake Tahoe Basin. The Sierra Nevada Mountains offer 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.

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. A large percentage of the housing serves as vacation homes or as vacation rental properties; in 2003, nearly 69 percent were not owner occupied, indicating that year-round residents have been replaced by vacation, rental and seasonal use.

There are also on average 25 public events held per year in Placer County. Some are held each year to attract visitors from outside the Placer County, while other events attract mostly local residents, such as farmers markets.

## **Recreational Travel Characteristics**

The past decade has seen a shift in recreational travel trends that affect the demand for destination areas such as Placer County – particularly demand from travelers from other parts of the United States and international locations.

Demographic trends that affect recreational travel include an aging and increasingly educated population, more dual-earner households, and increasing disposable income.

American households are more likely to take more frequent, long weekend, short trips closer to home. Extended, multi-destination, long-distance travel has been on the decline since 2001. More than half of all frequently travel trips in the United States are now for two days or less, with only 20 percent trips lasting a week or more. Entertainment is an increasingly important component of this travel.

Travel for meetings, conferences and conventions also declined after 2001. Growth is associated with economic activity. This market is now growing again. Travelers are now often extending business trips to include leisure travel activities adjacent to major metropolitan areas. Business trips are also more likely to include family members than in the past; however, the majority of business trips are still taken by solo travelers.

Travel associated with organized group/membership had been increasing through the 1990s, however, growth essentially stopped after 2001. Long term increases should continue, as it is highly correlated to the aging of the population and increasing incomes. Much of this travel occurs during the summer, is very value-oriented providing a packaged experience of education and entertainment. Agritourism is a growing segment of this market.

The preferred travel season for most Americans is June, July and August when well over a third of leisure travel occurs. Family travel in particular is oriented to these three summer months. Spring and fall travel tend to be somewhat more popular among empty nesters. Gaming-oriented travel occurs year-around; meetings/convention travel is more oriented to fall and spring.

Other factors that affect recreational travel decisions include competition from other leisure, recreation and educational activities. Travel costs and traffic congestion are also important considerations as they affect the ability of visitors to travel to an area, and are particularly important for those traveling from 100 or more miles away.

The California Trade and Commerce Agency defines tourism as leisure vacation travel over 50 miles in length requiring an overnight stay. Recreation is defined as leisure activities in which participants travel less than 50 miles and do not require an overnight stay.

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, Gold Country (Sierra-Nevada foothills), and the High Country (North Lake Tahoe), 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 recent surveys, the majority of visitors to the North Lake Tahoe area come from within a three hour drive typically, the Sacramento region and the San Francisco Bay Area. Travelers from elsewhere in California and other states visit Placer County as part of their itinerary. International travel to Placer County comes primarily from Canada and Mexico, but also from Japan and the United Kingdom.

Visitors within the two to three hour drive 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 seasonal, primarily 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.<sup>1</sup> 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; although for many Californians camping and day hiking are favored. 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.

Reno-Tahoe International Airport (RTIA), with about 160 daily departures, offers the most direct scheduled passenger air service within close proximity to the High Country region of Placer County (about 50 miles from RTIA to Tahoe City). 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 popular 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. As a result, high volume recreational travel routes can have an associated commuter use.

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*<sup>2</sup>, 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.

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<sup>1,2</sup> *North Tahoe Regional Traffic Management Plan*, LSC Transportation Consultants, Inc., February 19, 2003.

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) and at Alpine Meadows Road/State Route 89. Traffic signals have been installed at Squaw Valley Road/ State Route 89, at Northstar Drive/ State Route 267, and at State Route 89/28 at Fanny Bridge to reduce or eliminate the need for seasonal manual traffic control programs. 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 capitol, 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.

## **Recreational Travel Economic Impacts**

The California Trade and Commerce Agency’s Division of Tourism (CalTour) estimates that the travel industry and associated recreation in California generates approximately \$55.2 billion annually (6.5 percent of the gross state product) and supports almost 700,000 jobs statewide, making California first in the nation for travel earnings, domestic visitors and overseas visitors.

Tourism and recreational travel are an integral part of the regional economy, contributing millions of dollars to the Placer County economy each year; providing business opportunities, employment, and tax revenue for many local communities.

Direct travel spending in Placer County for 2008 was \$787 million, growing by an average annual rate of 3.8 percent per year from 2003 to 2008. Total earnings represented \$425 million. Accommodation and food service represented the majority of \$163 million in other sales. Local and state tax receipts from tourism and recreation, not including property taxes, amounted to \$43.9 million. Travel spending in 2007 averaged about \$3641 per Placer County household.

Recreation and travel industry employment stayed relatively flat between 2003 to 2008, employing 14,150 people, with direct employment at 9460 people, distributed as follows in Placer County: 4500 in the High Country, 2250 in the Gold Country, and 2700 in the Valley. Most people are primarily employed in accommodation and food services, with the remainder in recreation, entertainment and the arts.

Based on surveys of visitor perceptions, traffic congestion has a negative impact on economic growth in recreational travel and tourism. Past surveys indicate that traffic congestion is one of the reasons that tourism is not growing in relation to population growth.<sup>3</sup>

## 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;
- 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; and
- Addressing rural traffic conflicts attributable to agritourism traffic.

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<sup>3</sup> *Placer County General Plan - Background Report*, Volume I, August 16, 1994.

## RECREATIONAL TRAVEL ACTION PLAN

### Short and Long Range

1. Promote and use intelligent transportation systems (ITS) to improve recreational travel. (*PCTPA, jurisdictions, 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, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)
4. Identify public infrastructure in need of expansion, as well as maintenance and repair to support tourism and recreation. (*PCTPA, jurisdictions, Caltrans, transit operators*)
5. Expand the availability of alternative transportation options (transit, rail, bike, pedestrian, airport shuttles) to driving the personal (private or rental) automobile. (*Transit operators, PCTPA, jurisdictions, Capitol Corridor, employers, resorts, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)
6. Provide coordinated feeder transit services to parks and attractions. (*Transit operators, resorts, employers, Caltrans, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)
7. 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, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)
8. Identify opportunities for joint projects and activities to maximize the effectiveness of limited funding opportunities. (*PCTPA, jurisdictions, Caltrans, SACOG, TNT TMA, resorts, employers, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)
9. Work with primary marketing organizations to develop travel guides, way finding signage and to designate tourism routes. (*PCTPA, jurisdictions, Caltrans, SACOG, TNT TMA, resort, business and merchant associations, visitors bureau, chambers of commerce's, recreation providers, United Auburn Indian Community of the Auburn Rancheria*)

## **RECREATIONAL TRAVEL PROJECTS**

While there are no 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 regional roadways, public transit, aviation, passenger rail, non-motorized, TSM, and ITS chapters of the Action Element.