## OFFICE OF THE ATTORNEY GENERAL STATE OF NEVADA

In the matter of: TAHOE REGIONAL PLANNING AGENCY

OAG FILE NO.: 13897-423 & 440

#### FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

#### **BACKGROUND**

The Office of the Attorney General ("OAG") received Complaints<sup>1</sup> from Doug Flaherty alleging violations of the Nevada Open Meeting Law ("OML") by the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency ("TRPA") and the Tahoe Transportation District ("TTD"). The Complaints allege that the TRPA violated the OML in its actions during and surrounding meetings occurring between April 2021 and July 2021.

The OAG has statutory enforcement powers under the OML and the authority to investigate and prosecute violations of the OML. NRS 241.037; NRS 241.039; NRS 241.040. The OAG's investigation of the Complaints included a review of the Complaints and supplemental information; the response from the TRPA and attachments; the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact ("Compact"), the TRPA Rules of Procedures, applicable Nevada statutes, and applicable case law.

After investigation of the Complaints, the OAG determines that the TRPA is subject to the OML, that it violated the OML by failing to include public comment periods, failing to include contact information for the person from whom the public can request meeting supporting material, failing to denote action items with "for possible action," and failing to prepare and approve minutes for all its public bodies.

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<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>1</sup> Your complaints were filed on June 30, 2021, July 10, 2021, July 13, 2021, July 18, 2021, July 22, 2021, August 25, 2021, and November 22, 2021.

- 1. The TRPA and TTD were created by an Act of Congress through the ratification of the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact.
- 2. The Tahoe Regional Planning Compact constitutes federal law, which preempts Nevada law.
- 3. The Compact has reserved the rights of the states to impose state law on the TRPA regarding the  $\rm OML.^2$
- 4. The Compact does not seem to reserve the rights of the states to impose state law on the TTD regarding the OML.
- 5. Article III (d) of the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact states that "[a]ll meetings shall be open to the public to the extent required by the law of the State of California or the State of Nevada, whichever imposes the greater requirement, applicable to local governments at the time such meeting is held."
- 6. TRPA agrees that the State of Nevada's open meeting law ("OML") imposes the greater requirements and so follows the Nevada OML. See also *Tahoe Reg'l Planning Agency v. McKay*, 590 F. Supp. 1071, 1074 (D. Nev. 1984), aff'd, 769 F.2d 534 (9th Cir. 1985).
- 7. On or about June 30, 2021,<sup>3</sup> you filed your first of several Complaints stating your concerns that the TRPA violated the OML.
- 8. You alleged that (1) the TRPA violated various requirements of the OML regarding meeting agendas and postings of notices, (2) the TRPA violated various

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>2</sup> The Compact, Article IX, does not include a provision subjecting the TTD to the Nevada or California OML. For that reason, no investigation was made of your allegations against the TTD.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>3</sup> NRS 241.039(2)(a) requires the Office of the Attorney General to investigate violations of the OML if alleged in a complaint no later than 120 days after the alleged violations. NRS 241.039(2)(c) allows the Office of the Attorney General to investigate older violations if they were not discoverable and the complaint is not filed more than 1 year after the alleged violation. Several of the concerns in your complaints fall outside of the 120 days and some outside of the 1 year requirement. Based on a review of the facts, it does not seem that any of the alleged violations reported more than 120 days after they allegedly occurred, but less than a year after, were not discoverable at the time. Therefore, those complaints will not be investigated pursuant to NRS 241.039(2)(a).

requirements of the OML regarding meeting minutes, (3) the TRPA deliberated out-side of a public meeting.

9. On January 13, 2022, the TRPA responded saying that it was not subject to the OML as the compact which created the TRPA is based on federal law, and federal law preempts Nevada state law. The TRPA additionally asserted that it did not violate the OML.

#### LEGAL STANDARDS AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW

The Open Meeting Law governs meetings, gatherings, decisions, and actions obtained through the collective consensus of a quorum of the public body membership.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. The TRPA is Subject to the OML

The Tahoe Regional Planning Agency was created by an Act of Congress through the ratification of the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact. The TRPA states that the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact is federal law which preempts Nevada law, including the OML. In support of this claim, the TRPA cited League to Save Lake Tahoe v. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, (7 F.2d 517 (9th Cir. 1974); Lake Tahoe Watercraft Recreation Ass'n v. Tahoe Regional Planning Agency, 24 F.Supp.2d 1062, 1068 (E.D. Cal. 1998). These cases confirm that the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact constitutes federal law. The Court in Lake Tahoe Watercraft Recreation Ass'n directly addressed this issue when it stated that "[t]o the extent that the [Compact] conflicts with state law, the [Compact] preempts state law." 24 F.Supp.2d at 1069. This Court further explained that "the only exception to this rule is where a compact specifically reserves the right of the state to impose state law on the compact organization." Id. In addition, the League to Save Lake Tahoe Court also stated that that an interstate compact was a "statute of the United States." 507 F.2d at 522.

The Compact has reserved the rights of the states to impose state law on the TRPA regarding the OML. Article III (d) of the Tahoe Regional Planning Compact states that

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>4</sup> See also Dewey v. Redevelopment Agency, 119 Nev. 87, 64 P.3d 1070 (2003) (collective process of decision making must be accomplished in public).

"[a]ll meetings shall be open to the public to the extent required by the law of the State of California or the State of Nevada, whichever imposes the greater requirement, applicable to local governments at the time such meeting is held." This section of the Compact clearly reserves to the State of California and the State of Nevada the right to ensure that TRPA's meetings are "open to the public." TRPA agrees that the State of Nevada's open meeting law ("OML") imposes the greater requirements and so follows the Nevada OML. See also Tahoe Reg'l Planning Agency v. McKay, 590 F. Supp. 1071, 1074 (D. Nev. 1984), aff'd, 769 F.2d 534 (9th Cir. 1985).

The sole dispute is to what extent the Nevada OML controls. TRPA argues that the Nevada OML controls solely "for the limited topic of which meeting should be open to the public" and none of the other aspects of the Nevada OML are applicable to the TRPA. TRPA further argues that the Compact, its Code of Ordinances and its implementing Rules of Procedure "preempt conflicting provisions" of Nevada OML. The OAG respectfully disagrees.

The Ninth Circuit affirmed a case that discussed this very topic. In *Tahoe Reg'l Planning Agency v. McKay*, the Court stated that the Nevada OML "is expressly incorporated into the [Compact]." 769 F.2d 534, 537 (9th Cir. 1985). In that case, the Nevada Attorney General was attempting to enforce a Nevada Attorney General's opinion of a provision of the Nevada OML against the TRPA. While the Court disagreed with the Nevada Attorney General's opinion, neither the District Court nor the Ninth Circuit Court stated that the Nevada Attorney General lacked the ability to pursue its case against the TRPA or otherwise enforce the Nevada OML against the TRPA. Further, the District Court discussed various aspects of the Nevada OML and their application to the TRPA. *Id.* at 1073-1074, 1076-1077. See also *Tahoe Reg'l Planning Agency v. McKay*, 769 F.2d 534, 537 (9th Cir. 1985) (discussing the Compact using Nevada OML "to fill the interstices" of the Compact.) Based on the language of the Compact and the Ninth Circuit's case law, the Nevada OML fully applies to the TRPA.

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# 2. The TRPA Tahoe Living: Housing and Community Revitalization Working Group is a Public Body Subject to the OML.

You believe that the TRPA Tahoe Living: Housing and Community Revitalization Working Group is a public body and is thus required to comply with the OML. As described above, the TRPA is subject to the OML. NRS 241.015(4)(a) includes in the definition of "public body" committees, subcommittees and other subsidiaries. As the Working Group is a "formal committee of the TRPA's Advisory Planning Commission" as stated in the support material dated August 12, 2020, describing the Working Group member roles and responsibilities, the Working Group is a public body subject to the OML. Further, working groups are defined as public bodies when they are created by a public body and the working group is authorized to make recommendations to the public body. Here, the Working Group was allowed to make recommendations to the TRPA's Advisory Planning Commission, and it did. See NRS 241.015(4)(d). Finally, it seems the TRPA agrees that the Working Group is a public body due to the changes it has made as explained in its response.

# 3. The TRPA Agendas' Descriptions of Agenda Items were "Clear and Complete."

You alleged that several of the TRPA's agendas<sup>5</sup> included descriptions of agenda items which were not "clear and complete," specifically you alleged the following agenda item descriptions were not "clear and complete": agenda items IV,V,VI(A)-(D), and VII of the Working Groups' April 7, 2021 meeting agenda, agenda item VI(A) of the TRPA's Advisory Planning Committee's June 9, 2021 meeting agenda, agenda item III(A) TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021 meeting agenda.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>5</sup> You allege the entire April 28, 2021, meeting agendas for the TRPA Governing Board, TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee, the TRPA Environmental Improvement, Transportation, & Public Outreach Committee and the TRPA Operations & Governance Committee were not clear or complete. You also allege the entire May 26, 2021, agendas for the TRPA Governing Body, TRPA Legal Committee, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee. When filing a complaint with the Office of the Attorney General specific allegations of possible violations of the OML are required. Bulk allegations that an entire meeting agenda does not include clear and complete statements is not enough to state a claim under the OML. For that reason, these allegations were not investigated.

NRS 241.020(3)(d)(1) requires that a public body's agenda include a "clear and complete statement of the topics scheduled to be considered during the meeting. The Nevada Supreme Court stated that "Nevada's Open Meeting Law seeks to give the public clear notice of the topics to be discussed at public meetings so that the public can attend a meeting when an issue of interest will be discussed." *Sandoval v. Bd. of Regents of Univ.*, 119 Nev. 148, 155, 67 P.3d 902, 906 (2003).

A. Agenda items IV, V, VI(A)-(D), and VII of the Working Groups' April 7, 2021, meeting agenda were "clear and complete."

Based on a review of the description included in Agenda items IV, V, VI(A)-(D), and VII and the meeting notes, the Working Group's April 11, 2021, meeting agenda did provide a "clear and complete" description of Agenda items IV, V, VI(A)-(D), and VII. Your allegation that the descriptions were "generalized" is not valid. A review of the minutes from that meeting shows that the agenda item descriptions provided followed what was discussed in those agenda items and so the public was provided clear notice of what would be discussed. As the description was "clear and complete," the Working Group did not violate the OML.

B. Agenda item VI(A) of the TRPA's Advisory Planning Committee's June 9, 2021 meeting agenda was "clear and complete."

Based on a review of the description included in Agenda Item VI(A), the meeting minutes, and the support materials made regarding that Agenda Item, the TRPA's Advisory Planning Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda did provide a "clear and complete" description of Agenda Item VI(A). The public was provided clear notice that the TRPA's Advisory Planning Committee would be holding a hearing to discuss and possibly take action on the housing code amendments, including the specific chapters that would be possibly amended and a description of what those chapters cover. As the description was "clear and complete," the TRPA Advisory Planning Committee did not violate the OML.

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### C. Agenda item III(A) of TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda was "clear and complete."

Based on a review of the description included in Agenda Item III(A) and the support materials made regarding that Agenda Item, the TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda did provide a "clear and complete" description of Agenda Item III(A). The public was provided clear notice that the TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee would be holding a hearing to discuss and possibly take action on the housing code amendments, including the specific chapters that would be possibly amended and a description of what those chapters cover. As the description was "clear and complete," the TRPA Local Government & Housing Committee did not violate the OML.

### D. Agenda item VI(A) of TRPA's Governing Board's July 29, 2021, meeting agenda was "clear and complete."

Based on a review of the description included in Agenda Item VI(A), the support materials, and public comments made regarding that Agenda Item, the TRPA Governing Board's July 29, 2021, meeting agenda did provide a "clear and complete" description of Agenda Item VI(A). The public was provided clear notice that the TRPA Governing Board would be holding a hearing to possibly approve housing code amendments, including the specific chapters that would be possibly amended and a description of what those chapters cover. The fact that the support material includes more information than the agenda does not detract from whether the description of the agenda item was "clear and complete." The support material will almost always have more information than the agenda item description, the OML solely requires that the public receive clear notice of what is being discussed by the description of the agenda item. As the description was "clear and complete," the TRPA Governing Board did not violate the OML.

### 4. The TRPA Did Not Deliberate Outside of a Public Meeting.

You allege that the Working Group violated the OML by using a survey to conduct electronic deliberations outside of a public meeting. The Working Group sent out a survey to its members asking various questions about Accessory Dwelling Units. The Working Group provided a summary of this survey at its April 7, 2021, meeting and it states that 18 of the 21 members of the Working Group responded to the survey. The OML applies to meetings in which a quorum of a public body meets to "deliberate toward a decision or to take action on any matter over which the public body has supervision, control, jurisdiction or advisory power." NRS 241.015(3)(a)(1). Without a quorum and deliberations/actions, a public meeting is not held and the OML does not apply.

Here, the survey was sent to a quorum of the Working Group, and a quorum of the Working Group provided responses, but there is insufficient evidence that the members of the Working Group saw the other members' responses before the April 7, 2021, Working Group meeting. The fact that a quorum provided responses to the survey is not enough evidence by itself for an OML violation, there must also be evidence that a quorum saw the answers of the other members, thus showing that a quorum of the Working Group deliberated outside of a public meeting. Without evidence of deliberation or of any action being taken, the OML would not apply even though a quorum of the Working Group responded to the survey. As there is insufficient evidence that a quorum of the Working Group deliberated or took an action outside of a public meeting, there is no violation of the OML.

# 5. The TRPA Did Not Violate the OML by Describing its Public Comment Periods as "Public Interest Comments."

You alleged that TRPA violated the OML by describing its public comment periods as "Public Interest Comments." NRS 241.020(3)(d)(3) requires that an agenda for a public

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>6</sup> TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA

meeting include periods "devoted to comments by the general public." Those periods can either be at the beginning and end of the meeting or after "each item on the agenda on which action may be taken is discussed by the public body, but before the public body takes action on the item." NRS 241.020(3)(d)(3)(II). The OML does not require that the description of the public comment periods use any specific words or phrase. Therefore, as there is no description requirement for public comment periods and the description used by TRPA provides notice to the public that they are allowed to make comments during that period, 7 the TRPA did not violate the OML.

6. The TRPA Complied with the OML by Posting its Agenda and, Generally, with Public Comment Periods. The TRPA Violated the OML by Failing to Include Contact Information and Failing to Denote Action Items with "For Possible Action."

You allege that TRPA's agenda included several violations of the OML including failure to post the agenda in the Incline Village General Improvement District's ("IVGID") office,<sup>8</sup> not providing a list of locations where the agenda was posted,<sup>9</sup> insufficient public comment periods,<sup>10</sup> missing contact information for the person from whom the public can

Governing Body's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Legal Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, and Tahoe Transportation District's June 18, 2021, July 23, 2021, August 4, 2021, meeting agendas.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>7</sup> To prevent confusion, it may be recommended that the agenda description for public comment periods state "public comment," but it is not a requirement of the OML.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>8</sup> Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Advisory Commission's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, and TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>9</sup> Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Advisory Commission's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, and TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>10</sup> Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Legal Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, and Tahoe Transportation District's June 18, 2021, July 23, 2021, August 4, 2021, meeting agendas.

request meeting supporting material, 11 and failure to denote action items with "for possible action." 12

First, during the time in question (April 2021-July 2021) the State of California's Executive Order No. N-29-20 and/or the State of Nevada's Declaration of Emergency 006 were active. These executive orders suspended the requirements to hold meetings with physical locations and post physical notices in public. Therefore, there does not appear to be a violation of the OML for failure to post a notice at IVGID's office or for failing to provide a list of locations where the notices were posted due to the States' executive orders.

Second, in general, the allegations that TRPA did not include sufficient public comment periods is inaccurate. As shown by TRPA's agenda minutes, TRPA provided public comment on its action items and again at the end of the meeting before adjournment. This complies with the second option listed in NRS 241.020(3)(d)(3)(II). Therefore, there is no violation of the OML.

The allegation that the TRPA did not include sufficient public comment periods is accurate for the Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting. In that meeting, the TRPA failed to include public comment periods as required by the OML and thus violated the OML.

Third, your allegations that TRPA's agendas were missing contact information for the person from whom the public can request meeting supporting material and failing to denote action items with "for possible action" appear to be accurate. A review of the agendas mentioned was completed and your allegations were correct that these requirements (See

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>11</sup> TRPA Advisory Commission's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Legal Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, and TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda.

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>12</sup> TRPA Advisory Commission's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Governing Body's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Regional Plan Implementation Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, Tahoe Transportation District's June 18, 2021, July 23, 2021, August 4, 2021, meeting agendas, and TRPA Governing Body's July 29, 2021, meeting agenda

NRS 241.020(3)(c) and NRS 241.020(3)(d)(2)) were not being met by TRPA. TRPA, in their response, seems to admit that they were not in compliance, but have since stated that they are complying with these requirements. This missing information violates the OML.

# 7. The TRPA Violated the OML by Failing to Prepare Minutes and Approve Minutes Timely.

You allege that the TRPA did not approve minutes with 45 days or at the next public meeting. There is insufficient evidence to show that the TRPA did not approve the meetings minutes timely for the TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting, TRPA Legal Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting, and TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting. Separately, there is evidence that the TRPA did not adopt the minutes timely for the Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting, and TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting. Based on a review of the meeting information and TRPA's response, TRPA did not adopt meeting minutes for several of its meetings. This is a violation of the OML.

#### SUMMARY

Upon investigating the present Complaints, the OAG makes findings of fact and conclusions of law that the TRPA is subject to the OML, that it violated the OML by failing to include public comment periods, failing to include contact information for the person from whom the public can request meeting supporting material, failing to denote action

<sup>&</sup>lt;sup>13</sup> Working Group's April 7, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA's Local Government & Housing Committee's June 9, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's April 28, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Legal Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, TRPA Environmental Improvement; Transportation & Public Outreach Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda, and TRPA Operations & Governance Committee's May 26, 2021, meeting agenda.

items with "for possible action," and failing to prepare and approve minutes for all of its public bodies.

If the Attorney General investigates a potential OML violation and makes findings of fact and conclusions of law that a public body has acted in violation of the OML, "the public body must include an item on the next agenda posted for a meeting of the public body which acknowledges the findings of fact and conclusions of law." NRS 241.0395. The public body must treat the opinion of the Attorney General as supporting material for the agenda item(s) in question for the purpose of NRS 241.020. *Id.* Accordingly, the TRPA must place an item on its next meeting agenda in which it acknowledges the present Findings of Fact and Conclusions of Law ("Opinion") resulting from the OAG's investigation in this matter. The TRPA must also include the OAG Opinion in the supporting materials for its next meeting.

Dated: July 3, 2024.

AARON FORD Attorney General

By: <u>/s/ David M. Gardner</u>
DAVID M. GARDNER
Senior Deputy Attorney General

I hereby certify that on the 3<sup>rd</sup> day of July, 2024, I served the foregoing **FINDINGS OF FACT AND CONCLUSIONS OF LAW** by depositing a copy of the same in the United States mail, properly addressed, postage prepaid, CERTIFIED MAIL addressed as follows:

Doug Flaherty

Complainant

Certified Mail No.: 7020 2450 00011950

John L. Marshall TRPA General Counsel P.O. Box 5310 Stateline, NV 89449-5310 Counsel to the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency

Certified Mail No.: 7020 2450 0001 1950 7306

/s/ Debra Turman
An employee of the Office of the
Nevada Attorney General