

Sustainability leader gives primer to SLT commission

By Kathryn Reed



Making a city green or sustainable takes some green, aka cash, to make it a reality.

That was one of the key messages conveyed by Leon Churchill, city manager of Tracy.

He addressed South Lake Tahoe's Sustainability Commission on Wednesday afternoon. South Tahoe Mayor Jerry Birdwell heard Churchill speak last month at the League of California Cities meeting and believed his message should be heard locally.

Churchill's presentation touched on how funding is critical, as is buy-in from the community — the general public, businesses and economic developers.

“One thing I had to communicate to the City Council is not only do people expect sustainability, but businesses do,” Churchill said. “High-growth companies are green companies.”

He told the commission and audience that it's a city's choice to mandate sustainability or encourage it through incentives. Tracy has opted to take the incentive approach by having green builders go to the front of the line and having about 30 percent of their fees waived.

Churchill admitted Tracy's planning process had to be

redesigned as the city took on sustainability.

Claire Fortier, co-chairwoman of the local commission, asked Churchill how Tracy defined its goals.

The city manager explained that some things are somewhat automatic like land use planning, whereas other issues were handled by teams set up to talk strategy.

He further said that a city could steer behavior by using tax benefits or a penalty fee to get what it wants.

Churchill said it's important to turn emotional support of sustainable practices into financial support. He added that many resist the green-sustainable movement because of fear and false belief it will hinder economic development.

Even though going green may use dollars up front, there are long-run economic benefits " not just the environmental pluses.

Tracy has reduced its energy consumption by 40 percent by using sustainable practices.

"That's a real savings. It preserves jobs," Churchill said.

He told the commission to think about hiring a grants writer or fundraiser " someone who may take 20 percent off the top, but doesn't cost the city a penny. Another way to fund sustainability is to partner with a 501(c)3 or foundation. He said to tap into federal stimulus money, the state and consider in-kind donations.

"Make sustainability and its funding a deliberate strategy," Churchill said.