

SLT balances budget, infuriates employees

By Kathryn Reed



For weeks several council members have harped on wanting the budget to be brought before them – notably Hal Cole and Jerry Birdwell who make up the finance committee.

Finally, it was on Nov. 17. In a matter of seconds it was a done deal.

No discussion.

No comments.

Nothing but a 4-0 vote. Councilman Bruce Grego was absent.

It all seemed a bit surreal.

Most of the discussion Tuesday centered on the seven bargaining units in the city that had been negotiating with staff to amend their contracts to help bridge a \$3.4 million budget gap.

During those discussions Councilman Bill Crawford asked how without all the unions agreeing to cutbacks could the city come up with a balanced budget. Finance Director Christine Vuletich said she would explain it when the budget was before the council.

But she never had to because a vote was taken and that was that.

The last time the city discussed the multi-million dollar budget in any depth was at the Sept. 29 workshop.

What happened in last 49 days is unknown. *Lake Tahoe News* has requested the final budget to be provided now that the council has approved it.

In years past approval of South Lake Tahoe's final budget was a lengthy process with councilmembers going over it in a deliberate manner. Without their scrutiny of it in public, the public doesn't visibly know how thoroughly they have dissected it.

Considering staff and councilmembers have less than a stellar image with those who live in the city limits and surrounding area, to not have any discussion on such an important document is almost shocking.

In an era when questions keep being raised about how money is spent and who has discretion to spend it, it would have seemed logical for details to have been provided even if no one was left in the audience to ask the questions.

The summary document that was provided lacks details – as would be expected.

The summary does explain in generalities how the \$3.4 million deficit was overcome.

Nearly \$600,000 comes from ongoing savings from three frozen positions, four temporary people filling jobs, the Redevelopment Agency paying the bulk of the city attorney's salary, one layoff, and \$80,000 in miscellaneous savings.

About \$1.4 million is saved in furloughs and equivalents.

Reserves were depleted by \$1,446,792 to bring the savings to \$3.42 million.

In the 2009-10 budget (the fiscal year started Oct. 1)

expenses total \$101,498,655, with revenues projected to be \$102,352,148 for a net revenue of \$853,493.

The general fund, which is the core operating budget for the city, is projected to have \$28.99 million in revenues. However, expenses are tallied at \$30.49 million.

Besides passing a budget more than a month late, the council managed to seemingly upset the majority of its employees who are represented by unions. This is because the three groups that renegotiated their contracts – South Lake Tahoe Employees Association, South Lake Tahoe Administrative and Confidential Employees Association, and South Lake Tahoe Safety Management Committee – thought every group had to come up with a deal by Nov. 17.

It was the deadline. The deadline the council said it wanted a budget for 2009-10. Staff came through without all the bargaining units needing to amend their contracts.

The groups which didn't reach a deal were South Lake Tahoe Firemen's Association, South Lake Tahoe Police Officers Association, South Lake Tahoe Police Supervisor Association, and South Lake Tahoe Police Association (non-sworn employees).

It was the firefighters who came out in force Tuesday. They filled the back of the room, many standing because all the seats were filled. They were visibly and audibly disgruntled with the city – accusing the city of negotiating in bad faith.

The city negotiating team is made up of City Manager Dave Jinkens, Vuletich and another finance department employee, Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti, and Human Resources Director Janet Emmet.

Most of the councilmembers felt like they were caught in a "he said, she said" situation. Because of this, either Cole or Birdwell will sit in on future negotiations. The council agreed 4-0 to this procedural change.

This is unusual. Elected officials usually trust staff and are not part of a negotiating team. This is a clear signal the council has lost faith in city leadership.

Scheduling is a main issue the police and fire personnel want addressed. Both groups believe by reworking the schedules it will save the money the city was seeking.

On a 3-1 vote the council accepted the amended contracts with the unions that had signed off on them. Though it should be noted the votes to approve the amendments were not unanimous by the workers.

Cole voted no because he didn't agree with the amendment stating staff and unions would go back to the tables within in six months. He wanted it sooner.

Firefighters said they are wary of returning to the table anytime soon because they don't trust the city's negotiating team.