

Fallen Leaf Lake concessionaire out after 14 years

By Susan Wood

With the Fallen Leaf Lake district board awarding its general store to a new concessionaire after months of fighting with some community members, the results provided two pictures of the aftermath as different as the scenery from season to season.

Rick Firkins of All Star Catering of Albuquerque, N.M., who lives part time in Christmas Valley, said Tuesday he was excited about the prospect of the new venture at the lake where he's fished for years. He called the place "underutilized" and pledged to expand the cafe menu and grocery inventory.



Ruth and John
Rich

The Fallen Leaf Lake Community Services District decided Saturday in a 3-1 vote to hand over the operation to Firkins under the supervision of the board and staff General Manager Tom Barnes after expressing months of distrust in Fallen Leaf Landing's accounting practices and disagreeing over what it would pay in rent. New board member Jennifer Thornton dissented.

Former President Dana Clark had resigned a few weeks earlier, capping off a tumultuous time for the quiet mountain village outside South Lake Tahoe at the base of the Desolation Wilderness.

And come August, the issue may be far from over as the divided community heads toward an election to fill a seat on the five-member panel. It may decide March 6 whether to place the open seat on the Aug. 31 ballot.

Firkins admitted to walking into a hornet's nest that has divided the community, but looks forward to working with the board, which had outlined a contract and expectation of \$134,000 to operate the district in the 2010 season. The board failed to get agreement from Fallen Leaf Landing on at least \$101,000 in rent to run the store and marina.

Even though the contract highlights the marina operation, Firkins said he plans to focus on the store and cafe.

Terms of the five-year contract include the district receiving a minimum rent of \$75,000 a year and a security deposit of \$25,000, along with 10 percent of store, marina and boat-rental fees in addition to 65 percent of mooring revenue.

"I appreciate being considered. There had to be a problem or I wouldn't have been considered," Firkins said. "I told them it should have been done sooner."

On the other end, John Rich of Fallen Leaf Landing said he wants to focus more on his family but remains angry at a "few people in the community with an agenda." He expressed much disappointment in having years of experience and months of wrangling over a contract with the board come to such an abrupt end.

The longtime Fallen Leaf Lake residents were ousted after 14 years when contract negotiations reached an impasse, despite numerous letters against and legal threats aimed at the board

when it explored taking over the operation. Ruth Rich told *Lake Tahoe News* she wished to thank all the customers and members of the community who supported her family so ardently.

“We’ve had a long track record of serving this community very well. I don’t think (the board’s) concerns were valid,” John Rich said, citing the district insisting on open access to the revenue and expenses of his dual operation. “Expense access is not conventional.”

But board President Mike Kraft disagreed.

“The district has to know the value of its asset,” Kraft said. “In order to properly operate, the district needs to accrue \$126,000 minimum.”

After balancing assets and liabilities, the district reported \$744.41 in its general fund as of Jan. 31.

“Given the options the board was presented with, we felt we had no option than to go with the plan we went with,” Kraft said.

On the contrary, resident Debra Barnes took issue with what she perceived as “the board’s inept decision-making that has outraged the community,” she told *Lake Tahoe News*.

“The residents are shocked and appalled at the Community Services District vote and decision to hire a concessionaire that has no experience running a retail store and marina. This caterer did not participate in the (request for proposal) process and did not submit a bid within the RFP deadline,” Barnes said.

Firkins made a presentation to the board on Saturday. It is not known who invited him to do so.

“I expect that voters of Fallen Leaf will pursue every available option to them to return the governance of the Fallen Leaf community to a majority vote of reasonable minds.

Jennifer Hall Thornton's swearing in last month was a step in that direction, but more needs to be done and I expect will be," Barnes added.

Lake Tahoe News inquiries went unanswered from Betsy Wheeler, who came armed at one recent meeting with a petition legally challenging the board's last proposed ousting of Fallen Leaf Landing.