

Fallen Leaf Lake concessionaire issue nears resolution

By Susan Wood

The board tasked with running Fallen Leaf Lake operations agreed to start negotiations with a local electrician to run the store and marina in the small mountain haven near South Lake Tahoe.

In a complete turnaround of events, Saturday's meeting, which included snippy comments between board members, concluded with Community Services District board President Mike Kraft declaring it the most "positive" gathering, applause and a unanimous 4-0 vote in favor of South Shore residents' Rob and Sandy Wirths' proposal as concessionaires.



The Fallen Leaf Lake board is close to having a concessionaire for this summer.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

With an eye on summer approaching, the district sent board

member Jennifer Thornton to meet with the Wirths – who run Innovative Electric – to hash out the final contract. Thornton pledged to return with either a thumbs up or down by April 10. Board members are optimistic because the Wirths have seen the contract as a baseline for what's expected.

At the end of the meeting at Lake Tahoe Airport, a collective sigh of relief seemed to embody the embattled board, which has run up against months of opposition by a segment of the community that did not want former concessionaires John and Ruth Rich ousted. After 14 years of operating the hub of the mountain village, the couple found themselves at odds with the board about accounting practices and an agreement over rent to be paid to the district, along with other issues.

The quagmire led to a breakdown in talks with the Riches, legal threats by the community, former board President Dana Clark resigning, and the previous choice of concessionaire after the Riches' stint to opt out less than a month after agreeing to take the helm.

As it stands now, the contract calls for a \$121,500 minimum rent to be paid to the district for revenue gained by the concessionaire for running the store, café and marina under a six-year lease. The concessionaire needs to put up a \$20,000 security deposit to assure performance of the lease.

"If I would look at that contract for a job, I would do it," Kraft told Rob Wirth, who was one of about 20 people in the room for the meeting that lasted more than four hours.

When Rick Firkins backed out of the concessionaire role last month, Kraft ran an advertisement to find a replacement. In Saturday's meeting, Thornton questioned his authority to do so and insisted he should have called an emergency board meeting.

"You were out of line," she said.

On numerous occasions like this one, Kraft pointed to the

clock ticking as motivation for his actions. And with that, tensions mounted.

At one point, he told Thornton to “zip it” when she repeatedly demanded he follow the bylaws and involve the board more in selecting a concessionaire.

To that, Thornton barked that she wasn’t a child.

After a break, the board plowed through its agenda and civil conversation resumed. When the agenda returned to the concessionaire, it was as though clouds had lifted when Wirth gave his five-minute pitch to run the operation.

“I’d like to bring a good attitude and fresh community feel, which I think is needed, especially after sitting in on this meeting,” he said, adding he’d like to use a team effort from those he knows and bring the community together. The issue has divided the mountain village for almost a year.

Wirth came armed with letters of recommendation, including one from Food and Beverage Director Dave Dennis of Stanford Sierra Camp. The two men worked together for seven years at the lake’s university retreat.

Beyond running an electric company, Wirth has served on the Barton Hospital Foundation board and the South Lake Tahoe Code of Appeals Commission. Since 1988, he’s lived at Fallen Leaf Lake with his family, where he enjoys water skiing and backcountry snow skiing.

It’s for these very reasons Wirth would like to make improvements to enhance the experience at Fallen Leaf Lake. He wants to add more hiking equipment to the store inventory and provide lakeview dining at the café.

In Wirth’s response to the request for proposals, he agreed to the financial terms in spirit and threw in a broiler and backup generator for good measure.

His proposed café menus are extensive and personal. Included are “Rob’s hearty quiche” and “Mom’s macaroni salad”. His children have put in their two cents, too. They want board games at the village store.

The plan is to have the operation running by Memorial Day weekend.

In other business:

- The board agreed to declare a special election for August to fill the seat vacated by Clark.
- In July, the district needs a two-thirds vote to continue a special tax to pay for the fire district at an annual rate of \$660 per improved parcel. El Dorado County is no longer providing funds to augment the Fallen Leaf fire district.
- The board also hashed out its five-year fire master plan and plans to soon hire a fire chief.
- The district decided to take up board member Terri Thomas’ idea to spend up to \$500 for improved communications, which would be anchored by a newsletter.