

South Shore water meter project off to rocky start

By Kathryn Reed

Surprises. There have been a lot of them as crews put in water meters on the California side of the South Shore.

One house had five lines to it. Pipes aren't the size crews expected. Some lines are not straight. Others aren't as deep as expected. Crews have dumped dirt on flowerbeds. Water hasn't been turned back on. Debris has come out of indoor spigots.



Streets around South Tahoe are a mess as water meters are put in. Photos/Kathryn Reed

It was such a cluster of chaos that construction teams in the Angora area were pulled from the job last week and sent to another location of El Dorado County. The North and South Upper Truckee areas are also slated for meters.

"We're working with the contractor to find a solution," Paul Sciuto, STPUD assistant general manager, said of the Angora situation. "There are a lot of unknowns."

It was hoped 40 meters would be installed each day. Some days it has been 15 because of the problems.

GPS units are being used to record where lines are so records will be correct going forward.

The small water districts that now make up STPUD put in much of the infrastructure South Tahoe PUD is responsible for. Lack of uniformity is normal.

South Tahoe Public Utility District has received a number of calls from irate individuals as the installation of nearly 2,800 meters began this month.

Sciuto gave a brief update to the board at its meeting this month. One of the problems is when staff went out to bid last fall to spend the \$4.38 million federal grant the bids were lower than expected. This resulted in being able to have a second bid with the "leftover" money. This also meant staff didn't do the thorough preparation it would have normally liked to have, Sciuto said.

"This project is much more intrusive than many," Sciuto told *Lake Tahoe News*.

Drive down Modesto Avenue in the middle of South Lake Tahoe to see how intrusive the project is. Tiechert Construction out of Sacramento started taking over the street Monday and could finish there today.

Several backhoes are churning away at the dirt to dig a hole big enough to fit a white plastic meter pit that is a couple feet tall.

Foreman Matt Carney said at first the city gave his team grief for being in the right-of-way. Then environmental groups complained about how the dirt was being handled. Carney believes everyone has been appeased.

"We get a lot of questions. People are leery about getting

meters,” Carney said as he kept an eye on his crew Monday. “I tell them it may lower their water bill. People have been good so far.”

Carney said one surprise has been how pristine the galvanized pipes are after all these years. He attributed this to the soil conditions.

Any landscaping or driveway that is dug up for the meter must be returned to how it looked pre-meter.

Sciuto said cost overruns were anticipated even though all the issues were not. He said if the add-ons were in the 7 percent range, it would be reasonable.

“At this stage it’s hard to gauge (what they will be),” Sciuto said. The district will pick up the cost of the overruns, not the grant. A line is in the budget for this.

All this work is part of the utility district’s quest to meet the state’s unfunded mandate to have water meters installed on every property by 2025. STPUD estimates it will cost \$20 million to put in the 10,000 units. The end result is supposed to be less water usage throughout the state.

New homes and ones with major remodels have been required to have meters since 1992. There are 1,600 of those.

One of the issues the local board must still grapple with is a rate for metered use. Money for a rate study is part of the budget that was passed last week for the fiscal year that starts July 1.

Paul Hughes, chief financial officer for the district, told the board a tiered scale is what staff is looking at once consumption patterns are established.

A workshop for the board will be scheduled in the near future to discuss metered rates.

Data from all of the metered residences will be collected for a year, most likely starting in 2011. This will give the district usage information as it goes forward with rates.

Some leeway exists in the state law when it comes to setting rates based on fixed costs and consumption. With the current flat rate, it means people pay the same no matter the usage. This scenario favors full-time residents. Paying based on consumption would likely favor second-home owners.

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