

Millions in grant dollars keep public entities afloat

By Kathryn Reed



Even in these economic times, grants continue to be available to public agencies, often from other public agencies.

In the 2009-10 South Lake Tahoe budget, the capital improvement program is receiving 35 percent of its budget from federal grants and 29 percent from state grants. That can be partially broken down to 21 percent from the U.S. Forest Service, 19 percent California Tahoe Conservancy and 11 percent Federal Aviation Administration.

The money the city receives from grantees goes toward Explore Tahoe, roads, erosion control, buildings and grounds, redevelopment, housing, equipment and the airport.

The road at the airport got paved this week with an FAA grant.

"Most of the city's grant funding is for capital projects," explained Christine Vuletich, city finance director.

She said in the five years she's been on the job she's noticed an uptick in grant dollars being secured even though the city does not have a grant writer.

Although the grant dollars are designated for specific purposes, it's likely the items those dollars go toward wouldn't otherwise be funded, especially when cash is in such short supply these days.

South Lake Tahoe is not unique in trying to obtain grant dollars. Most public agencies do. Lake Tahoe Unified School District has \$30 million in grants to add to the \$54 million bond voters approved – all for facilities.

South Lake Tahoe's Public Works Department obtains several grants each year for erosion control. Housing grants are another biggie for the city.

Vuletich does not have it broken down as to how much each department receives in grant funding.

On Tuesday the City Council approved the application for a grant from the U.S. Department of Justice. The police department is asking for \$16,883, which would be spent on equipment like Tasers, patrol rifle, handgun magazines, tactical ballistic blanket, ammunition and laptop computer.

Also at the meeting this week was a report by Nancy Kerry, redevelopment and housing manager, about the successes her department has had in the last year with grants and what the goals are for the coming year.

"What is great about looking back over the last year from what we applied and then received is to realize we did very well in our percentage of grants funded," Kerry said after the meeting. "The number of applications funded indicates it was time well spent, a good use of taxpayer resources."

She said the primary reasons the grants are needed is that it means jobs, stimulates business and in turn could help stabilize the housing market if people can keep paying their mortgages or rents.

"As for housing grants, those end up helping people get into their first home. That's good to have full-time owners in homes rather than second homeowners or renters. That's good for property taxes for the city and good for the neighborhoods and community," Kerry said.

Grants this year include the \$1.5 million Housing and Urban Development grant to remove lead based paint from homes in the city. It's creating jobs for contractors, money for Lake Tahoe Community College because it's providing some of the education, and cash for Barton Memorial Hospital because it will test children for lead disease

Kerry was in Tennessee last week for a seminar for all recipients of the lead based paint grant. (The trip is paid from the grant, not out of city coffers.) There she was able to tap into what the feds are looking for in 2010-11 grant applications.

"Right now the federal programs are focused on collaboration. They are looking for cities that can work well together, perform well and come up with innovative collaborative solutions to issues," Kerry said. "HUD is blending (Department of Energy) money and housing money into new Green Healthy Homes Initiative. The GHHI is the concept or theory that if homes are healthier, kids would be healthier and a healthier home is a green home, too."

Each year about \$20 billion is spent on children's illnesses, including asthma and allergies. The idea is the GHHI might help reduce the need for all those dollars.

"We'll take a look at funding opportunities for these kinds of programs because those too would go to the local contractors primarily, which help to circulate the funding among local workers and services," Kerry said.