

Mobile businesses under scrutiny on South Shore

By Kathryn Reed

Even though South Lake Tahoe adopted a resolution in July 2004 authorizing mobile vending services to operate in town, no regulations came with it. That is likely to change next week when the City Council is expected to discuss an ordinance regulating these businesses.

There was a short discussion during the first reading of the ordinance last week. The conversation bounced from businesses like Schwan's that can legally deliver food to people to unmarked trucks selling goods to people using pushcarts to sell food to people selling seafood door-to-door.



Schwan's is legal, but other mobile businesses are suspect on the South Shore. Photo/Kathryn Reed

The ordinance would clarify the requirements to own/operate a mobile vending service in the city, specify locations of operation, and establish health-safety regulations for the product and equipment.

El Dorado County has had a strict policy for a number of years. Sheriff's Lt. Les Lovell said his department has a zero tolerance policy for people operating businesses illegally out of their vehicles. No business license means a trip to jail.

Two repeat offenders were caught in May selling stereo equipment out of a white Suburban. The two men from out of town were arrested, the goods confiscated and \$4,000 in cash seized. Sheriff's deputies made the arrest at the Rockwater restaurant in the city limits.

It's possible from the cash seized that victims could get restitution.

"Persons wishing to make a report should be prepared to show that they were victimized. Although these transactions are almost always in cash, that should not be hard at all (to prove) as they will probably have the equipment and possibly even have some paperwork," said Hans Uthe, El Dorado County assistant district attorney. "People who get taken in by the scam should not feel bad. These guys are very, very slick and highly persuasive."

Although the May incident involved a Suburban, the "White Van Scam" is occurring throughout the country. It almost seems to be organized or perhaps it's just copycat criminals.

It's a typical bait and switch crime. The seller sets up shop out of the vehicle on a street corner or in a parking lot with goods for sale at extremely reduced prices. They claim their store is overstocked or have some other story for wanting to get rid of the goods. The product might appear to be in the original packaging. A second seller distracts the buyer and that's where the switch often occurs. What ends up in their hands isn't what they thought they were buying.

Sometimes the equipment is so shoddy it causes complementary components to short out.

“Buyer beware,” is how Lovell describes it. “You get what you pay for.”

Lt. David Stevenson with the South Lake Tahoe Police Department wasn't familiar with the “White Van Scam” and said these types of crimes come and go, though he hasn't noticed an increase in them.

Lovell said one of his detectives or deputies will work undercover when a suspicious vehicle is selling goods.

“They see where the (suspect) is keeping the money, where they keep the receipt books so we know what to look for when we grab them,” Lovell said.

People selling produce from the side of the road often don't have a business license and therefore are not regulated by the city or county. People selling firewood without a phone number posted are not always on the up and up either.

Lovell said he welcomes calls (530.577.3000) about people operating suspicious businesses in the county.

“It's not fair to hardworking locals who pay taxes,” Lovell said of the illegal vendors/businesses.