

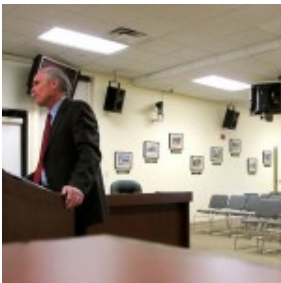
Public, employee panels divided on SLT city manager

By Austin Fay

A community panel reached an informal consensus to recommend Tony O'Rourke to the City Council to be the next city manager of South Lake Tahoe.

Seven community members spent 90 minutes questioning the two finalists Monday morning.

It may have been a waste of time for everyone involved because the City Council interviewed the men on Sunday, with Councilman Bill Crawford choosing not to be part of the process. After they were done with the session they reached the same conclusion – O'Rourke would be better than Mike Segrest.



Tony O'Rourke
delivers
answers at the
public forum
June 21.
Photo/Austin
Fay

O'Rourke has signed the necessary paperwork to start the background and reference check process.

However, that process will not begin immediately because the two other groups interviewing the candidates Monday – employees and department heads – were not as convinced O'Rourke is the man for the job. (Redevelopment Director Gene Palazzo was not an interviewer because he applied for the job and is still technically a candidate.)

It's possible the council will bring in three more candidates to be interviewed in the next week. The council still needs to reach consensus to do this. If more candidates are brought in, the three panels will be asked to reconvene to interview the next group.

If O'Rourke is not in the top two, the background check process will not begin.

About four city employees drifted in and out of the room at Lake Tahoe Airport during the public interviews, but were not available for comment. There was one person attending the meeting who was not a city employee.

A city manager is needed because Dave Jinkens is ending his eight-year stint as city manager on Aug. 7.

Who's on the panel?

The public panel was made up: Claire Fortier, vice chairwoman of the Sustainability Commission; Michael Berg, chairman of the Planning Commission; Chip Morrow, chairman of the Parks and Recreation Commission and on the Sustainability Commission; Sherry Miller, Airport Commission and the airport director; Hermano Aragon, Latino Affairs Commission; B Gorman, president/CEO Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce; and Ken Sands, representing the South Lake Tahoe seniors.

The South Lake Tahoe Chamber of Commerce and TACCD did not send representatives.

City Attorney Patrick Enright facilitated the process Monday.

Members of the panel were looking for different elements in a new city manager, but a common thread was the city needs an "agent of change." O'Rourke, in his slate-grey suit and businessman demeanor had "done his homework" the panel agreed, and was the strongest candidate to be that agent of change for South Lake Tahoe.

Questions were similar for the two interviews, with each representative having the opportunity to ask two questions, though some panel members asked more. Each interview lasted 90 minutes.

Questions entailed important issues the new city manager will wrestle with: fiscal policy in tough economic times, utility-related issues, the convention center project, annexation issues, collaboration with government agencies, anecdotal evidence of building consensus among other elected officials, as well as potholes.

The candidates

"He does come from the private sector, but he's got a wealth of public service as well," panel member Berg said of O'Rourke.

Segrest has been town manager in Moraga, a tony East Bay community of about 17,000 people, for more than a year. He also served as city manager of Snowmass, Colo. He is an avid sailor. One of the motives for Segrest's considered relocation to this "very charming community" is his wife's allergies.

O'Rourke touted his self-described "passion for the public," while emphasizing his experience in the private sector. O'Rourke has a background in marketing and managing, as he is executive director of Beaver Creek Resort Company based in Avon, Colo., a town of about 6,500 people and a regional population of about 61,700. During Monday's public interview he placed an emphasis on "creating a brand" of South Lake Tahoe combining his experience in private sectors.

“Being a city manager is effectively the same position as being the CEO of a company,” O’Rourke said.

Segrest has had much experience in the public sector and was forward in citing his strengths, which were finances and his decisive personality.

Post-interview comments

“If Tony doesn’t accept (the position), I would not be happy with Michael, and would like to look at additional people,” Gorman said with nods of approval from most of the panel.

Segrest responded to many questions with wandering, non-specific answers, giving way to a veneer of politician-speak; or, textbook answers that didn’t reflect a nuanced understanding of the issues facing South Lake Tahoe.

When speaking about budgets and money O’Rourke referred to \$100,000 as “not a small sum,” while Segrest thought \$700,000 was “not a lot of money.”

Interviewers were given reaction-prompting sheets where they were also able to make comments during the interview. *Lake Tahoe News* was denied access to the documents collected from interviewers at the end of the session because it’s a personnel matter, Enright said.

The City Council does not have a date set to make a decision, but may reconvene in “seven to 10 days” to make a decision, according to Enright.