

Money fuels discussion about fire issues in basin

By Susan Wood

It's been said time and time again: Leave it to a disaster to pull people together. Now the hope is the money will follow the people.

That was the overriding message conveyed Wednesday night at the South Lake Tahoe City Council Chambers by a high-profile panel speaking about the work of the Blue Ribbon Fire Commission formed by Govs. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Jim Gibbons as a result of the Angora Fire. Three years ago, the blaze ripped through 3,100 acres of the Upper Truckee neighborhoods and destroyed 254 homes and the confidence of many who call Tahoe home.



Assemblyman Ted Gaines, center, speaks with constituents July 14 about fire issues. Photo/Susan Wood

"We're not the same as we were before the Angora Fire," South Lake Tahoe Mayor and panelist Kathay Lovell told a group of

about 30 citizens who came out for the forum moderated by California Assemblyman Ted Gaines, R-Roseville.

Each person on the seven-member panel provided an update of where the region stands on what's been done and what needs to be done to get the wildland urban interface area, aka – those zones that link the cities with the rural landscape – back to an acceptable level of forest health.

Terri Marceron, Lake Tahoe Basin Management Unit forest supervisor, announced her hot-off-the-press report of the U.S. Forest Service's findings of no significant impacts received on the Angora Fire Restoration Project. The study encompasses the Angora burn area, which stretches up Lake Tahoe Boulevard, into the North Upper Truckee neighborhood and alongside Gardner Mountain.

The 1,416-acre plan calls for planting trees, removing dead ones, rechanneling Angora Creek, removing invasive weeds, restoring the Gardner Mountain meadow and rehabilitating Seneca Pond – located near the point of origin of the blaze caused by an illegal campfire. The remaining 1,300 acres of National Forest will be untreated. The public has 45 days to challenge the plan.

Marceron billed the findings as a significant leap in plowing ahead with the overall rehabilitation plan. Up to this point, the first phase involved the mop-up and the second included erosion control measures. This third, long-term stage is scheduled to begin in the fall.

The timeline hasn't moved fast enough for John Adamski, who provided a heartfelt and frustrated plea to the federal government to move faster on its South Shore Project, a 10,000-acre fuel reduction and forest health plan that is in the works. He alluded to his 200 neighbors wondering: "Why should I treat my defensible space if the Forest Service is not doing their work?"

Marceron assured the citizenry LTBMU “has the findings and the funding” – including \$3.5 million from recent federal stimulus funds – to move ahead with its plans.

Now it’s up to the reauthorization of the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act to keep the momentum going. It’s up to Congress to make that happen. This was a point of interest panelist and Tahoe Regional Planning Agency chief Joanne Marchetta keyed into.

Marchetta told attendees she’s proud of the accomplishments made by the organizations the panelists represent and the changing nature of the TRPA.

She mentioned expanding the size of a tree deemed OK for removal without a permit as one example. It was 6 inches. After the fire, the regulatory agency, once viewed by some as obstructionist, increased the size to 14 inches. The bi-state fire commission submitted 55 recommendations for TRPA, and it upheld them – including a multi-faceted cooperation with fire agencies and residents that allows for a record 68,000 acres treated for fuel reduction and 772 homes completing defensible space measures.

“Our priority is the partnership. TRPA is changing. I had to evacuate my home. The safety of this community is paramount, it’s our primary concern,” Marchetta said.

The balance between erosion control and fuel reduction is a tricky one for fire departments and water quality agencies. It takes time, staff and money – big money to the tune of approximately \$5 million a year to maintain a healthy forest that won’t erupt into a firestorm like what was experienced on the South Shore on June 24, 2007.

Fire commission member John Pickett, who serves on behalf of the Tahoe Basin Fire Safe Council, provided the ominous dollar figure when South Lake Tahoe resident Carl Ribaldo inquired about “the magic number” the multi-agency task force would

need to avert such a disaster.

“I think the taxpayer wants to see continual improvement,” Ribaudo said.

With that, Lake Valley Fire Chief Jeff Michael reminded the group that money should be “an ongoing issue” for fuels treatment.

Cindy Gustafson, general manager of the Tahoe City Public Utility District, would like to see the state kick in funds for fire suppression for her 26 individual water systems.

Gaines took note of what he and his colleagues in the Legislature could ensure is the still non-existent state budget.

The other panelists were Bill Holmes of CalFire and Lauri Kemper with Lahontan Water Board.