

Wright: Land trust would provide South Lake recreation

By Kathryn Reed

For 30 years, Les Wright has wanted to start the Lake Tahoe Land Trust.

He first proposed the idea to South Lake Tahoe officials three decades ago. At that time he thought increasing the hotel tax by 2 percent would accomplish the goal. The goal being to raise money so property could be bought and either turned into parks, bike trails or open space.

As he tells the story, city officials liked the idea, too. They raised the transient occupancy tax. But it all went to the general fund, not to a land trust, not even designated just for recreation.



Les
Wright

Now Wright's idea is to increase property taxes for everyone living in the boundaries of Lake Tahoe Unified School District so \$1 million could be raised each year. How much this would cost the average homeowner or business has not been analyzed.

With this most likely being formed as a 501(c)3 nonprofit, it would not be possible to tax property owners. So how Wright will actually secure the funding remains a mystery.

He also doesn't want the cash collected from taxpayers to be used for maintenance and operations – just land acquisition.

Wright also wants the tax to go on indefinitely. No type of sunset clause was brought forth by him. The concept was not considered until *Lake Tahoe News* questioned the legality of his idea. It could mean generations from now would be taxed without representation.

Any tax idea has to go before the voters, with two-thirds saying yes for it to pass.

Wright, who has been on the city's Parks and Recreation Commission as long as he has had the land trust idea, talked about bringing his dream to fruition at last week's Recreation Commission meeting.

"I wonder what South Lake Tahoe would look like today if we had that 2 percent (from the TOT)," Wright said.

Wright, who is best known for having created the Lake Tahoe Marathon, is seeking the commission's endorsement for the idea. The commission may take a vote at its next meeting. The June 28 session was just a discussion. The vote would not be on the land trust itself, but whether commissioners support developing the idea further.

Neither the commission nor the Parks and Rec Department would ever be directly involved. The trust would be a private entity.

The dictionary describes a "land trust" as – a trust created to effectuate a real estate ownership arrangement in which the trustee holds legal and equitable title to the property subject to the provisions of a trust agreement setting out the rights of the beneficiaries whose interests in the trust are declared to be personal property.

The idea for the Tahoe trust, according to Wright, is to buy vacant land or rundown buildings, and then give the land over to entities that could turn them into a recreational facility. He envisions a 21-member board being the stewards and

overseers of the whole process.

Peter Eicher, with the California Tahoe Conservancy, was at the meeting because he knows about buying land.

“It’s not easy to just acquire property and let it sit. You need to keep it fire safe and you’ll run into encroachment issues,” Eicher told the group.

Some people at the meeting brought up the idea of partnering with another trust instead of starting from scratch.

To that, Wright said, “I don’t want anything to do with another trust.”

But he also said when the Lake Tahoe Land Trust is a reality he plans to donate the first lot.