

Tallac Association struggles to be financially solvent

By Kathryn Reed

CAMP RICHARDSON – Negative numbers fill the ledger of the Tahoe Tallac Association – putting the board in the awkward position this week of offering the executive director a contract extension with little or no money to pay her.

Staff (high season has three full time and four part time) has been cut, though it is a bit normal to make cuts as the season winds down; Executive Director Lori Cramer and Director Carl Wooland are essentially working as volunteers despite the fact they should be paid staff; rates on weddings have been cut in an attempt to lure brides and grooms; grants are being sought; and an advisory committee is in place to help right the unstable ship.



Carl Wooland and Lori Cramer are almost working for free for the Tahoe Tallac Association.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

As of Sept. 20 the TTA had \$2,617.19 in the bank.

"I'm having a hard time selling the site (for weddings) without the lawn," Cramer told the board Monday.

In the past, the association has rented out the Grand Hall at Valhalla for weddings, with receptions often on the adjacent grassy area. But the U.S. Forest Service, which owns the property on the outside of the South Lake Tahoe city limits on Highway 89, recently nixed that practice.

The decision resulted in needing to refund \$9,000 worth of deposits for the 2009 season.

Rental income, which is wedding and the holiday faire, raised \$53,215 for the fiscal year ending Sept. 30. For 2008-09 that figure was \$118,451. That's a difference of 55.1 percent.

One of the problems is the Forest Service doesn't usually manage buildings. That's one reason why the agency was going to burn all the buildings down when it took ownership of the historic sites that were once home to wealthy San Franciscans.

Jonathan Cook-Fisher, special uses program manager for the Forest Service, has been in the position for less than a year. He isn't familiar with the 30-plus year history of his agency's contentious relationship with the Tahoe Tallac Association.

Cook-Fisher wants to work with the TTA so its annual Valhalla Arts and Music Festival thrives. The summer-fall festival season is the purpose of the TTA. It's just that weddings came along and helped keep the nonprofit afloat.

The Forest Service has a financial interest in ensuring TTA is financially solvent. The Granger-Thye permit sends about 15 percent of gross profits to the USFS to be used solely for restoration at the site.

Cook-Fisher said he doesn't know why the lawn was once allowed

to be used for weddings and now isn't.

The TTA board says other Forest Service staff has reinterpreted the environmental impact statement and special use permit that it works under.

The association claims it lost between \$5,500 and \$11,000 by not being able to stage outdoor culture events on the lawn. What irks the board even more is that it pays to maintain the lush green expanse to the tune of \$7,000 year.

When the two sides do meet, another issue the TTA will bring up is the gate not being open and the parking spaces it believes are theirs that the USFS keeps for itself.

Again, these are issues Cook-Fisher said he is not well versed in.

The TTA is crafting a letter to send to Terri Marceron, forest supervisor, and hoping for a meeting before she heads to Alaska.

Cook-Fisher said he is ready to talk to TTA now.

"I would like to move from emails and informal discussions to a formalized proposal (from them) that this is what (they) want to do and why. We are not quite there, but I think we will get there," Cook-Fisher said. "We like to see (from all permittees) some sophistication of how folks develop a business plan, what service they provide to the public and how it all works together."

The Tallac Association has a plan, but believes the Forest Service changes the rules. TTA has done some number crunching, extrapolating what the loss of use at the site per current USFS rules means to the entire South Shore bottom line, not just TTA's. It is in the millions of dollars when things like lodging for the people not able to use the site is added in, linen rentals not booked, photographers not used, restaurants

not frequented and so on.

The TTA is not blaming its meager bottom line solely on the Forest Service. It knows it has to change some thing going forward regardless of what the landowner does.

This is Cramer's first season at the helm after the board let the previous executive director go. Ticket prices did not necessarily reflect what it cost to bring in a performer. Grants have not been written for all the money that is out there.

A tentative schedule was presented to the board for the 2011 season that calls for recurring events like a local band performance the first Thursday of each month. The idea is people would get used to being at the site more consistently.

At the end of the evening the board met in closed session to discuss Cramer's future. They offered her the executive director's job and she wants it. It remains to be seen if a contract can be worked out along with a conflict of interest clause crafted. Executive directors have made in the mid-\$40,000s in the past, with no benefits. The conflict issue is Cramer has a wedding business. This past season she was not permitted to schedule any weddings at Valhalla for her business.

TTA's annual gala fundraiser is Dec. 4. The Tahoe Improv Players are having a benefit performance Sept. 27. TTA also sells memberships.