

Bonner: continue to build our location as a recreation destination

Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News is profiling candidates for South Lake Tahoe City Council and Douglas County Commission. The stories are being published in the order they were received.

Name: Lee Bonner

Age: 51

Hometown: Minden

How long have you lived here?: 5+ years

Job/profession: Communications, public affairs



Lee Bonner

What would you build or tear down on the South Shore to make it great, as in what Whistler is like?

This is excellent, yet, tough question to answer. First, let me start by saying one person doesn't and shouldn't make a decision like this with no regard for the community or its members. It's a community decision, but one that the county should invest in by the giving of expertise and time.

To begin this discussion, I would gather a group of

stakeholders that consists of gaming, Realtors, business owners, homeowners and other key Tahoe organization representatives to define what the problem areas are. If you are going to do something of this magnitude, you must define the problem you are solving. That's step one. Once the problem has been defined, we begin to look at multiple ways to solve that problem. With a possible outcome culminating with a comprehensive, multi-year approach that addresses the findings of the stakeholders. Each stakeholder will gather input from their group or organization and bring that back to the committee. And a formal plan should emerge that addresses the needs. I believe that we can do this together and come up with the right plan to make this happen. When we all work together the possibilities are endless.

One issue we should address is the stalled convention center project. As we look to a long-term strategy, this should be a part of any lake revitalization plan going forward.

One question back to you: Why be like Whistler when we can be better?

On a personal note: I would love to see us build a north facing outdoor amphitheater that has a north view of the lake, with the sun in the west, it would be a perfect setting to view the lake and watch a concert, play or musical. This would be the premiere outdoor venue for concerts in all of Northern Nevada. I believe Edgewood Companies has a great location for something like this.

What form of recreation do you participate in? What improvements to recreation would you strive to make throughout Douglas County?

Equestrian, skiing, boating, hiking, swimming, fishing, camping, art and concerts.

We need to continue to build our location as a recreation destination and work in combination with other agencies to

market what we have to offer. This also means a continued investment in roads and trails, upon which to travel.

One aspect of the county that I think is not being utilized to the fullest as far as tourism is the great equestrian trails we have. We are doing well in many areas, but we could do more in the area of trails and adding the current trails to the geo-tourism area sponsored by National Geographic. If you would like to be a contributor to this site, I would encourage everyone to participate. We are a part of the Tahoe Emigrant corridor. Click on the Tahoe Emigrant Corridor section, you can enter in your own trails and make this a great guide for locals and tourists alike.

Recreation tourism is expected to be the driving force of the South Shore economy in the coming years, what do you specifically plan to do to improve bike paths and roads?

Roads are a critical part of the county plan. We have to maintain our investment in infrastructure if we want to attract more businesses and tourists. Who wants to drive on an asphalt road that feels like a washboard? While we are in an economic downturn we must maintain key investments in the county or we face a longer hurdle later.

Bike paths are not only a form of recreation, but they are a way to keep our citizens safe and protected from the heavy traffic we experience on the roads. We need to establish a long-term strategy to maintain and expand the existing bike path system we have. When you look at future road improvements we should keep pedestrians and bikes in mind. Currently if you try to bike down the lake side of Kingsbury, there are some safety concerns I have for those on bikes.

Bike paths and trails are also a key part of who we are as a community, but as a horseman, let's not overlook the horse community. We all work well together and we can all share in the beauty of this area that God created.

How do you plan to boost revenue in Douglas County?

The key answer is jobs ... we need jobs and that means we need key businesses large and small to make Douglas County home as well as ensure that existing businesses thrive through our support and efforts. The salary of a person is multiplied five times as money changes hands. From restaurants to grocery shopping to leisure activities and housing. We need jobs from a variety of business types to be sustainable for the next decade. A mix of industries will broaden our portfolio of revenue which will drive sustainability when the economy isn't growing.

With my experience in business process and expertise in collaboration and problem solving, I can bring a skill set to the commission that will help us over the hurdles in the next administration.

When you look at experience, you have to look at what the candidate has done with their experience. I have been committed to the county in many ways in providing leadership and expertise at the nonprofit, county and state level in many different facets from education to economic growth. This experience in working with many organizations across our county and state will only benefit the county with the working relationships I have built.

What stands out for you in the 2010-11 budget?

What stands out to me is that we have had declining revenues for the past four years and while making cuts, over the past four years, we have not done much to create a better business environment.

The county was able to come in with a balanced budget through severe cuts. Everyone pulled together and made the cuts necessary. The economic boom to Douglas County happened over the last 10 years and if we want to make cuts, we should take a look at the programs we have created during those years. As

we list all those programs and we look at declining revenue, we must prioritize what makes sense for us to continue providing.

How do we prioritize these programs? By examining the return on our investment, (ROI) those programs that are working well and are returning the largest numbers and giving us value we expected are the ones we keep. Those programs that are not providing the return we need or what we expected from our programs are cut. We continue to support and fund those programs that are meeting the greatest need. We cut those that drain the budget and do not provide the expected return or services to the community.

However, when the economy spirals, there are some things you can count on. As revenue goes down, church attendance and crime go up. Our sheriff has invested his career to ensure a safe place to live work and play in Douglas County. To that end, we must ensure we don't compromise that basic premise of quality of life to cut a few dollars. Further, current business owners and those considering moving here, look at crime in the top three priorities. Let's not shoot ourselves in the foot ... pardon the pun.

What needs to be done to allow businesses to thrive in Douglas County?

First, while we are in a downturn economically, we should be working to streamline the process. If the process is 143 steps, let's make it 43. Second, the county should be surveying the new businesses and as a county let's learn from our current businesses what the pain points are in the process and ask them what they would have changed. Let's also talk to builders and do the same thing with their permitting process. The county has customers in the way of business and her citizens and their voice should be heard and should tell us what the needs are.

Our county has a reputation of not being business friendly and if we are to be successful we must simplify the process and become a bit less cumbersome and more nimble, while always ensuring public safety.

We have had businesses that wanted to come here, but due to issues in working with the county they left and went elsewhere. Word of mouth travels fast and makes its way back to other companies wanting to do the same thing. If we cannot change public perception, we will have a long road to become business friendly.

What are the three major issues facing Douglas County and how to expect in four years to make it so they are not major issues when your tenure is through?

Jobs! Education! Government!

We have lost jobs in the last few years and that along with the economy has caused some local businesses to go under. An influx of jobs into the county will help us have a healthy, vibrant community. This can be done by being more business friendly and streamlining the permitting process for builders and business.

I think we all agree we need jobs and that will help turn the county revenue situation around, but also involved in this process is to look at what the pain points for business are and what the county has done to help or to stifle businesses across the county.

Another focal point in our county should be promoting education. While Douglas County has a good education system, we are in a state that is consistently ranked near the bottom. The state budget doesn't have the funds to help us in the next few years and in order to attract and retain businesses and employees I would like to see the county make a deeper investment in education. Let's look at public-private partnerships with education to make our county a flagship

county for education, not just in the state of Nevada, but beyond her borders. We may not be able to change the rank of our state, but by making Douglas an even better stronger school system we can do what's best for our county and influence the state.

I also list government as a key issue. When the Legislature reconvenes in February they must cut 50 percent of the state budget and I see that a significant portion of this will fall to the county in both revenue taken and services passed down to fulfill. We need leadership that knows and understands the issues and knows how to deal with the legislature and has experience in doing so. I have that experience.

What have you done to help Douglas County be a better community?

I have spent my time in Douglas County giving back to the community as both a volunteer and participating with many nonprofit organizations. Prior to my work as an engineer and working with GE, I was spent years working as a youth minister and teacher to high school students and I have always been very involved in working with communities. I believe that you lead from your head, but you run for office because of your heart. In order to be an effective public servant you must care as well as lead and that is the make-up of who I am. I am involved in many aspects of the valley, both in the nonprofit sector and in the business sector by being on the Board of Directors for the Business Council. I work closely with the Nevada Commission on Economic Development and am also engaged in the Renewable Energy Task Force for the state. All of this experience can be leveraged in the county in providing expertise in business and leadership for our county.

I serve the community out of respect for its legacy and expectations for the future. I not only serve on several boards, this is my passion, this is who I am and this is who I will be as your county commissioner.

What boards, commissions, or other experience do you have?

I am currently involved with the following organizations:

Nevada Commission on Economic Development – Energy Technology Advisor

Northern Nevada Development Authority – Board of Directors

Workforce/Education Task Force – Chairman

Business Council of Douglas County – Executive Board, Vice President

Carson Valley Arts Council – Board of Directors

Douglas County Sheriff's Mounted Posse

Douglas County Sheriff's Advisory Council – Board of Directors

RAVE Foundation

Family Support Council

United Way

GE Volunteers

Lake Tahoe Shakespeare Festival

10,000 Kids Inc

Backcountry Horseman

Lifepoint Community Church

Carson Valley Chamber of Commerce

E. Clampus Vitus

Why should voters vote for you over someone else?

I am a problem solver, collaborator, leader, volunteer, and I

know how to get things done. In the past two years the world has changed, we can't do things the same way we have done them. It will take someone who knows how to work with others, is a team player and can work to get measured results. We need a leader that understands where we need to go and also has a respect for the legacy of this great county. I feel I am that person.

Being employed by a global energy leader, I have experiences locally, nationally and internationally. And my career as an engineer and businessman, has given me tremendous fortitude, understanding of local and global problems. All of my professional experience will translate directly to the job I am running for.

What would you do to make the lake and valley more unified?

This is a goal many before me have had and not succeeded. When you look at what the county has in place currently, it has the appearance of being separate. We have two commission meetings in the two areas. Two sheriff locations. And when you add the natural barriers of the grade as well as the mountains and the high desert we have created and fostered this separation. The reason for this apparent separation was correct in spirit. The county wanted to respect and acknowledge that the lake was important enough to duplicate certain aspects of government. In the future we could examine having more joint meetings for the commission with both the lake and the valley in attendance at the same time and place.

BlueGo, the public transit, is mired in lawsuits and bankruptcy. Do we need public transit on the South Shore? If so, how do you propose to make it functional?:

Transportation is a key issue in any community and Douglas County is no exception. It's unfortunate that issues with BlueGo are where they are. We need public transportation, but we also need to have our services pay for themselves. With

county revenues in a decline of the last four years, we simply cannot afford to do what we used to. We have to cut back and unfortunately that has affected transportation.

In the future we need to evaluate where the needs for transportation are. I see that as connecting the lake to the valley and also connecting Topaz with the valley. Let's meet with the groups and see what type of limited service is needed, establish a budget and work to find ways to make this happen. Unfortunately, we cannot afford everything and ultimately any program needs to be self-sufficient.

What is your stance on the 100-room rule for gaming growth in the county?

Let me first mention that gaming growth is the toughest two words to use together right now. Gaming has been in a decline for 20 years and shame on us for not seeing this and diversifying our economy years ago. The problem we have is not the fault of gaming, it's the fault of us not being able to see around the corner that this was an issue long ago.

There are two issues at play here. First, a local valley business, Hamdogs, planned to expand and increase the number of gaming machines, which required a zoning change. Second, is the implementation of a rule designed to protect our local investment in the gaming industry.

Let me start by saying – we don't want 100 more rooms in Douglas County and for that reason alone I think it should not have been approved as written. If you want someone to make an investment in the area, there are other ways of doing this that would make more sense to the community. I don't want to see more hotel rooms here in our near future.

The 100-hotel room issue was designed to protect our casinos and protect the investments that are already here. While it's not connected to the local business Hamdogs, it is partly in response to them. If elected, I will inspire and nurture more

ideas, vetting of the possibilities, and will not jump to any one conclusion. I will do my homework, suggest more than one option or solution on these difficult issues and invest all the time needed to know all the pros and cons. As well, I will ensure that they are clearly explained to the public before I place any vote. This is not to be construed as delay and red tape tactics, but just the opposite ... transparency and efficiency.

What bothers me about this issue, and I see both sides, is that we are a free enterprise system where capitalism is a part of what makes us who we are. To establish rules that stop capitalism and protect certain establishments is moving away from the principles that made us who we are as a country. Other countries do this, but it makes me cringe to see this happen in our own valley.

Think of it this way ... suppose you want to open a pizza restaurant at the lake and the commissioners tell you that in order to open your pizza place you have to build a 5-mile asphalt bike path. What if the county commissioners required this because they think we have too many pizza parlors? And if we add more pizza parlors, it will make other pizza parlors suffer and close down. We essentially shut off free enterprise by requiring something that doesn't really connect to the issue at hand. (This is not to say that after eating pizza maybe we all need to bike that 5-mile route to get the pizza off.)

Consolidation of water agencies is stalled, yet ratepayers are faced with higher bills. What are your thoughts on this issue?

Some county ratepayers will now be asked to pay more for water than in property taxes. When you do this to people on fixed incomes in these economic times, I find to be unacceptable. We must find a better resolution to this issue.

When I see that the county paid \$140,000 for a consultant and

allowed only one option to be returned, I have to look at the county for being the responsible party. As in any business, when you pay a consultant, you let them know what you want for that return. You will get what you agreed to and in our case – it was only one option, which was not a good option.

On the November ballot is an ordinance regarding the Minden airport. What is your position on it and why?

The airport is critical to Douglas County and is an important revenue stream for us of approximately \$50 million according to past figures. I agree with the ordinance and believe that it is the best solution in order for us to continue to receive federal funding. The airport brings a tremendous amount of revenue to the county and in order for it to be self-sufficient we rely on the federal grants.

When I talk to those not in favor of the ordinance I see there is a bit of mistrust with the county and when you lose trust it's hard to gain it back. I would like to work with both groups to re-establish trust, address the concerns of the community and bring the groups together. I do, however, support the airport ordinance as it is written.

Is there any individual, group or organization you would not take campaign money from? Why?

Integrity and transparency are critical to me as both an individual, as a businessman and as a politician. I have no problem turning down contributions based on moral standards, pay to play scenarios and any organization I do not agree with.

Tell us something about yourself that voters don't already know:

Play guitar and sing

Love to cook

I'm on my horse as much as possible

Taught high school students for 14 years

Two patents for my work as an engineer in the global energy sector