

# Chamber to spearhead South Lake's business program

By Joann Eisenbrandt

Local businesses have felt the brunt of the economic downturn in a town where survival is difficult even in the best of times. On Oct. 5 the City Council approved a contract with the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce to provide business coaching to low-income local businesses to help them survive. The \$100,000 contract is funded by California CDBG (Community Development Block Grant) funds.



Councilman Bill Crawford pulled the item for discussion, citing a conflict between this agreement and another agenda item, results from the South Tahoe Redevelopment Agency Project Area No. 2 Survey (Tahoe Valley/Y area). "In the Item No. 17 Redevelopment Survey," Crawford stated, "business people said mentoring services were not important to them. Why would we want to give \$100,000 to anyone if those taking part in the survey said they didn't want those services?" A summary of the survey results lists "Business Coaching and Mentoring Services" under "Not Important."

Crawford also cited a potential conflict of interest on the part of Nancy Kerry, the city's redevelopment/housing/economic development manager and a former chamber employee, who oversaw the RFP process. "As soon as I saw the chamber had responded to the RFP, I changed the review process. I wanted to avoid even the appearance of a conflict," Kerry said. She withdrew from review of the proposals; the chamber ultimately scored the highest.

Kerry told Lake Tahoe News that outreach to businesses has

been an important part of the city's economic development efforts for some time. The city recently re-branded its program as Business TIES (Tahoe Investors and Entrepreneur Coaches), which has brought increased interest in these services from the local business community. The city had been contracting with Golden Capital from Chico to provide these services.

The chamber will provide coaching by nine business professionals from varied backgrounds. Assistance is available only to low-income businesses that will contact the city to be qualified and then referred to the appropriate coach or coaches depending on their specific needs. Payment will not go to the chamber, but to the individual team members who do the mentoring.

Five of the nine local "coaches" spoke in support of the program and the benefits their years of experience and expertise could provide struggling businesses.

"I can apply what I've learned in 40 years of marketing," said Jim Barr of JFB Creative Services. "It's about helping local businesses. I want to be sure the restaurant that I visited last week will still be there the next time."

Some who spoke to the issue weren't convinced. Danny Freemon criticized the city for "leaving the Y area hanging out to dry," with projects there left "floundering."

"I don't think sending money across the state line (chamber offices are located in Nevada) is a good idea," Freemon said. He is also active in the California-based chamber.

How city money should be spent, who or what it gets spent on, and who should be involved in the decision-making process is not a new issue. In response to Crawford's question, "Who are these local pros?" doing the coaching, Mayor Kathay Lovell responded the city had been strongly criticized in the past for reaching outside the basin for contractors and

consultants, but this time was adding local talent to “the city’s toolbox.”

Crawford also questioned why the chamber had been unable to educate its 750-plus members in basic business survival techniques. B Gorman, president and CEO of the Lake Tahoe South Shore Chamber of Commerce, responded, “I won’t pretend this will be easy. Business owners are busy. It’s a challenge we face on a daily basis. People need help. They just don’t know they need it.”

Gorman told LTN the program will begin outreach immediately, but will remain a work in progress. “The parameters of the grant are for business coaching, but how each business gets that help will be based on their needs, whether it’s negotiating a lease, bookkeeping, developing a business or marketing plan, or confronting an Americans with Disabilities Act lawsuit. There are multiple layers to this program. Coaches may come back with new trends that need to be addressed. Things change. Two years ago no one was talking about ADA compliance.”

The council approved the contract, with Crawford voting no.

In other action, the council:

- Approved a resolution in support of Proposition 22, the Local Taxpayer, Public Safety and Transportation Act of 2010. Proposition 22 is an Initiative Constitutional Amendment which would prohibit the state from borrowing or taking funds used for transportation, redevelopment or local government projects and services.
- Solicited Applications for Appointment to the Airport Commission, Building Board of Appeals Commission, Delinquent Refuse Fees Hearing Board, General Plan Advisory Commission, Latino Affairs Commission, Parks and Recreation Commission, Planning Commission and Sustainability Commission.

- Accepted Congestion Mitigation and Air Quality and Regional Surface Transportation Program funding for the Pioneer Trail Pedestrian Upgrades Project (\$837,438). Money will be used for sidewalks and lighting in the heavily traveled area of Pioneer between Highway 50 and Larch Avenue.
- Extended the Transit Center Lease between the city and Heavenly for until October 2015.
- Recognized the month of October as Domestic Violence Awareness Month.
- Presented a proclamation recognizing the retirement of Gary Moore, director of Parks and Recreation following 36 years with the city.
- Received a report from Barbara Ferry, Census 2010 Partnership Specialist for the city. Ferry told the Council that Census figures for the city will be available in March 2011.