

O'Rourke: Revamp how SLT operates, create a clear vision

Publisher's note: *This completes this three-part series on South Lake Tahoe's budget. More stories will come in the future.*

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe's budget is convoluted and difficult to understand. After probing by *Lake Tahoe News* started earlier this year more documents have been placed on the city's website. This is a good first step.

Transparency, though, is still a bit elusive.

City Manager Tony O'Rourke plans to change how the next budget document looks. He wants a budget message at the front and a summary so the public can more easily discern what lies within.

Although warrants are paper clipped to the councilmembers' agenda packets, they are not actually part of the packet. This means they are not part of that public record. Warrants are a list of checks that have been written.

Councilman Bill Crawford for years has been trying to get this practice changed, as well as to have copies available at the meetings for the public.



Tony O'Rourke

But these warrants in many ways are useless. This is because there is no record to whether the check written was for something that was budgeted. It doesn't say what account the money came from. Nothing indicates what percentage or dollar amount of the account the money came from has been spent to date.

Without knowing if the various departments are within budget as the warrants are written, the information is as valuable as the paper it's printed on.

O'Rourke since his arrival in early August has called for a monthly budget update to be in the council's packet. That happened on Nov. 16, but it contained information for the month ending Sept. 30.

A case could easily be made that this is dated material, not current.

Councilmembers Kathay Lovell and Hal Cole represent the finance committee that is supposed to be working with staff. But neither has said anything about the budget at a council meeting since the 2010-11 budget was passed in August. This August approval of a budget that took effect Oct. 1 was unprecedented by a South Lake Tahoe City Council.

Ex-City Manager Dave Jinkens wanted it approved before he was out of office the first week of August.

"The budget process was highly centralized under David. It was him and the finance director," O'Rourke said.

Not much vision

The city has seldom been forward thinking more than the end of the fiscal year. But the deficits are going to continue. Transient occupancy tax, sales tax and property tax are the three main sources of income. They are stagnant.

The Teeter Law that allows the county to keep the pass through of property tax dollars going from the convention center parcels to the city will expire in a little more than a year.

Even though hotel bookings are up going into winter, the cost of those rooms is not what they were three years ago. Full occupancy does not mean the same amount of TOT collected in years past because the price of a room night is not the same.

What does the budget look like for fiscal year 2015-16 – five years from now? No one knows because the city hasn't planned for the future.

O'Rourke is shaking things up so that last paragraph can't be written again. He has assembled 40 people to develop a five-year financial plan. Rank and file staff up to directors are part of the panel.

"We need fingerprints and DNA of staff on (the budget)," O'Rourke said. "The result is they will have greater ownership. The process should be transparent and inclusive."

This process should eliminate department heads finding out about staff reductions days before the City Council votes for them – as was the case in August.

"The City Manager [Dave Jinkens] notified the Fire Chief via e-mail on July 28, almost one week prior to the August 3 City Council meeting," Vuletich wrote *Lake Tahoe News* in reference to the freezing of a division chief's job once the person who has the position retires in January.

Strategic planning

Without goals, the budget ends up taking a shotgun approach to city services instead of being streamlined.

O'Rourke wants to convene the council that will be seated next month – with 60 percent new faces – to create a strategic plan what will be “a shared vision for the community.”

He wants to focus on a handful of goals and achieve them. From his first interviews, O'Rourke said he is results-driven. To get there he believes the city needs to change its business model.

“We need to modify the business model to reflect the priorities,” O'Rourke said. “There is a thorough lack of infrastructure. We are so deficient in curbs and gutters it's mindboggling.

“We need to look at where we can get the money. We need to look at the expense side of the ledger, too.”

He's well aware the city cannot be all things to all people – thus the need to create priorities. And he doesn't want them to change on an annual basis.

A goal of his is to create a survey for staff and a separate one for the public in the next month.

“I want data to drive the decision-making,” O'Rourke.

When told the public has filled out surveys in the past only to have their wishes ignored, O'Rourke said it's still a necessity “to make sure we are on the same playing field.”

He wants to look at the services the city is providing to the public in addition to the facilities. His face contorts a bit while mentioning the locker room at the city pool and the condition it is in. “Hideous” was the word he used.