

# South Tahoe firefighters vote no confidence against chief

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe firefighters have taken a vote of no confidence against Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti.

The lack of credibility, communication and leadership are the issues firefighters have with the chief.

Gigliotti, who will have been at the helm for six years as of January, did not know about the vote until contacted by *Lake Tahoe News*.



Lorenzo  
Gigliotti

Asked if the news came as a surprise, he said, "Absolutely." He considers his relationship with the rank and file members as "pretty good."

The members, who belong to International Firefighter Association Local 4427 and the South Lake Tahoe Firefighters Association, have been disgruntled for a number of years with Gigliotti's leadership.

It wasn't until this fall that the vote of no confidence was taken to ensure it wasn't just the lousy economic situation that was influencing perceptions of how things are in the department, as well as three years of on again, off again

contract negotiations.

Union President Dan Sullivan deferred comment to Kim Gillingham of Goyette and Associates, the union's labor representative based in Gold River near Rancho Cordova.

"We distributed the executive evaluation form to all of our members. We did meet with the city manager about four weeks ago. We told him the vote of no confidence was done," Gillingham said.

City Manager Tony O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News*, "I haven't gotten anything official. I heard grumblings, but I haven't heard anything official. I would expect a letter or some communiqué."

Gillingham said another meeting had been set up two weeks ago with O'Rourke and Human Resources Director Janet Emmett, but O'Rourke had to cancel. It was rescheduled for a day when a storm hit. Another meeting has not been set.

"The goal is not to create more acrimony or compromise the community, but to share concerns so we can improve the department," Gillingham said. "This was not a traditional vote of no confidence. The vote of no confidence was to ensure the concern raised was a universal perception, and now what to do and how to start to create transparency."

But in paramilitary organizations like a police or fire department, a vote of no confidence is sending an unmistakable message that officers are demanding changes – whether it is personnel or behavior.

O'Rourke said he wants to talk to the union and the chief to resolve the issues. He believes critical critiques can be "a road map for improvement."

"It gives me concern, but it also gives me the opportunity to help him and the help the department to improve in those

areas," O'Rourke said.

He is conducting a survey next week of all city staff – which he has wanted to do since being hired in August. He is interested to see if what the firefighters say on that survey is similar to what the union is presenting.

Issues the firefighters have are working in a culture of fear – some were even afraid to participate in the vote of no confidence, Gillingham said. Fear of being black listed or not being promoted are concerns.

"The fear runs pretty rampant," Gillingham said.

She said the union wants all parties to work together, but that hasn't happened for years.

A memorandum of understanding the union has with management is there will be regular meetings between the two. Gigliotti has essentially eliminated those.

Gillingham says this exacerbates the distrust employees have with the chief.

Firefighters aren't thrilled with some of the expenditures the chief has authorized either.

The duty chief response vehicle was replaced in the 2009-10 budget for about \$52,000. But fire personnel who spoke to *Lake Tahoe News* off the record, which gets back to the fear factor, said this vehicle is not needed because all the chief officers have a vehicle and one of them is retiring at the first of the year.

What bothers the men and women in the department is what they call reckless spending for an unneeded vehicle when it wasn't until March that a 1982 fire engine was taken out of service. It no longer met state emissions standards.

"It is not the practice of the fire department to require fire

department employees to sign any form of waiver or 'liability form' to drive," Gigliotti said.

But that isn't what more than one firefighter told *Lake Tahoe News*. They said management asked for the form to be signed before this particular vehicle was driven.

Gigliotti said this engine has not been replaced because there has not been the funding to do so. It costs about \$70,000 to replace. So, management got a vehicle, but the firefighters have one less to use.

Funds for fire vehicles come from Proposition 172, the state safety sales tax, Gigliotti said.

"Proposed within the 2010-11 budget was the pursuit of grant funds to replace an engine, however, the 10 percent match created an impact which compromised a balanced budget so it was determined to pursue grant opportunities and should a grant be funded, to bring the grant back to the council for consideration and possible budget amendment. The result is this activity does not appear in the current budget document," Gigliotti said.

It is the City Council that ultimately decides which vehicles to buy – so they chose the manager vehicle with all of its bells and whistles instead of an apparatus to fight fires.