

# Citizen survey: South Tahoe functioning at subpar level

By Kathryn Reed

Although some would argue a survey did not need to be taken, South Lake Tahoe officials believe having current data in writing gives them the authority to make changes people want, instead of guessing what they want.



City Manager Tony O'Rourke took his own analysis in September about the city. The new council did the same in late December-early January. The public was sent a survey in December, with results released this month.

Everyone is on the same page – the natural environment is great, everything else needs improving. Less than half of the survey takers rated the direction of the city as good or excellent.

“Clearly, it’s not a surprise,” O'Rourke said of the entire survey. “Now we are developing a course of action to address those weaknesses and build upon the strengths. We’ll develop tactics and performance measures. Ultimately we need to build the public’s trust.”

From all this data and analysis of it, the council on Tuesday came up with five goals to work on.

Facts about the citizen survey:

- 1,200 utility customers were mail the survey – so not just South Lake Tahoe residents, but people affected by decisions the council makes;
- 390 surveys were returned, for a response rate of 35

percent;

- The National Citizen Survey compares South Lake Tahoe responses to about 500 jurisdictions elsewhere in the United States to provide a benchmark.

In the executive summary of the citizen survey it points out, "Of the 31 characteristics for which comparisons were available, three were above the national benchmark comparison, two were similar to the national benchmark comparison and 26 were below."

South Lake Tahoe is dead last with its residents when compared against others in employment opportunity category. Ninety-four percent said "poor" on the survey.

Compared to the 2008 citizen survey, people today believe things in South Lake Tahoe have gotten worse when it comes to ease of traveling via bus, car, bike and foot.

One thing that has improved slightly between the years is people think traffic signal timing is better. Otherwise they are more disenfranchised with streets – the repair, cleaning, lighting, snow removal, and sidewalk maintenance.

Forty-eight percent believe housing costs are reasonable, 20 percent believe there is ample affordable quality housing, and 30 percent believe the variety of housing is adequate.

In two years, people's sense of community has dropped four percentage points to 46 percent.

Consultant Mike Levinson was brought in to decipher the volume of paperwork in front of the five councilmembers Tuesday, which went beyond the survey, to bring perspective to the material, and help them set goals.

"You have enormous potential with your amenities, in particular your airport," Levinson said. "Fourteen percent of your tourists you are attracting are from Southern California

and they are driving eight to 12 hours.”

He believes commercial air service will double that percentage.

Levinson said with three-fifths of all tourists coming from California, “You should do more to promote within that market. You are not taking advantage of that.”

He also pointed out with 78 percent of the city’s budget devoted to salaries and benefits, the council is going to have to address it if the city is going to be solvent.

“If you take all the data, you can build a case for change. There is a lot of room for improvement,” Levinson told the council.