

Lively discussion leads to 5 strategies for S. Tahoe council

By Kathryn Reed

“Credibility is the currency of leadership.”

This was one of the nuggets of information Mike Levinson gave South Lake Tahoe city councilmembers during their three-hour strategic planning session on Jan. 25. Levinson, former city manager of Coral Springs, Fla., and now a consultant, was brought in for \$1,500 to facilitate the meeting and offer insight.

After hours of lively discussion, the council came up with five broad priorities to focus on. In no particular order, they are:



Consultant
Mike Levinson
leads the
discussion
Jan. 25 about
the direction
of South Lake
Tahoe.
Photo/Kathryn
Reed

- Economic development
- Infrastructure/built environment, including public works and technology
- Public trust, including communication and accountability
- Financial stability
- Partnerships, with private entities, as well as on the local, regional, state and national levels.

From here City Manager Tony O'Rourke will devise bullet points – or action plans that flush out what those five statements mean based on dialog given Tuesday.

“We'll put some meat on this bone,” is how O'Rourke put it.

Each councilmember will soon take ownership of one of the bullet points. The idea is to not micromanage the progress of staff, but to be the liaison from staff to the council, and when appropriate to be a voice in the public about the bullet point.

The reason to do this is to give each council person ownership as well as having to be accountable to the electorate they are doing something other casting votes every other Tuesday.

Part of the early discussion was on the results of the citizen survey. Compared against the SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis the council did of the city, the results parallel one another, according to Levinson. (*Lake Tahoe News* will be writing about just the survey in the near future.)

“If you take all the data, there is a bold case for change,” Levinson said. “There is a lot of room for improvement.”

In the free form discussion that led to the ultimate decision to focus on the five issues above, Mayor Hal Cole brought up

the idea of the city being more intricately involved in what happens at the foreclosed would-be convention center site. This would be a 180-degree turn from where the city wanted to have no real part of the project – especially financially.

“We might say this would be our (cultural center),” Cole said. He added how the former contract was laid out, the city might have been able to have 10-days of events at the site.

Councilman Bruce Grego wants to engage Heavenly Mountain Resort or its parent company Vail Resorts about being annexed into the city. (The California Lodge is in El Dorado County.) He is also an advocate of taxing lift tickets even though an amusement tax cannot be implemented for 22 years based on previous contracts.

Banter back and forth culminated with the opinion Heavenly would come to the table, but the city would have to have something to offer – like X number of events a year.

A survey of tourists that was discussed Jan. 25 pointed to how special events get people to the South Shore.

The dialog was not always linear, with topics bouncing all over the place.

Councilwoman Claire Fortier wants to ensure technology, like WiFi, is easy for locals and tourists to tap into.

The sign ordinance was brought up, quickly followed by code enforcement.

“We need a balance between pro business and pro aesthetics,” O’Rourke said of signs.

He proposed working with businesses as Caltrans begins making improvements to Highway 50 this summer and for several years after that. He threw out the idea of making the business community conform based on where Caltrans does its improvements so it all is done in small, manageable segments.

Councilwoman Angela Swanson brought up the desire to get the Prosperity Plan off the ground and finding a way to do so.

Much discussion focused on land use issues, including the cog Tahoe Regional Planning Agency can be in the wheel of progress.

Cole brought up how an issue with the Mikasa building is that TRPA mandates any building more than 50 years old be studied for its historical significance. It was pointed out the better part of the South Shore would fall into this category. The irony being much of the city is deemed a redevelopment area, meaning it has considerable blight.

Playing nice with others was a big component. It was pointed out how the city barely got Lakeview Commons approved because of the acrimonious relationship with El Dorado County.

Cole pointed to how he sat on the TRPA Governing Board with current Nevada Gov. Brian Sandoval, adding that relationship should be pursued. Councilman Tom Davis pointed to how the city used to have a lobbyist in Washington who helped secure money for the city.

Grego wants to develop a pool of candidates of people "with our sympathies" to help get placed on boards like Lahontan so perhaps the city would receive favorable treatment.

Levinson said he was surprised this is the first workshop the City Council has had in years, as well as that it doesn't have a public information officer to carry its message to the public.

The redesign of the city's website was brought up, with the idea it could be a portal of information about city issues as well as point visitors to appropriate locations.

Davis kept bringing up media relations without elaboration.

Fortier wants to create a recreation hub.

Cole would like the city to work with sections of town to have something like what Ski Run Boulevard developed with its business improvement district.

The council is expected to drill down on the five priorities at the first meeting in February.