

LTCC's personnel struggles causing unrest on campus

By Kathryn Reed

Leadership, or the lack of it, is creating a fissure at Lake Tahoe Community College that some say is bringing harm to the two-year institution.

The turnover in presidents, other administrators and personnel leaving by choice by having found a new job or retiring are taking a toll on what had been a stable institution.



Sue Niehoff at the March 15 Lake Tahoe Community College board meeting.

Photo/Kathryn Reed

The 30-plus-year-old college is on its fourth president – this one interim. Two of the five board members have been seated since the beginning.

“I don’t think you realize how important good leadership is until you don’t have it,” board member and college founder Roberta Mason said. When asked to elaborate, she said, “I was thinking of Guy (Lease). I think we relied an awful lot on

Guy. Maybe we didn't do the research on our own that we should be expected to do."

Lease was president of LTCC from 1990-2008. Prior to that he was dean of Business Services.

After him came Paul Killpatrick, who never was embraced by the college community. Now Steve Maradian is at the helm; hired to be interim president for this academic year.

Special board meeting

On March 15 the boardroom was full for a special 8:15am meeting. This in itself is an indication of the friction because seldom is anyone in attendance at the regular meetings.

The board, with member Molly Blann absent, started in closed session at 7:45am Tuesday. On the consent agenda for regular session was the notification of dismissal/discipline/release of the interim president and vice president of Business Services. This item was approved 4-0; with the only discussion in whispers among board members whether it should be open to public comment. It never formally was.

This was the second week in a row Sue Niehoff, the VP of Business Services, found out she was on the agenda when the paperwork came out instead of being afforded the courtesy from Maradian to be told before the masses found out.

Last week it was her annual review, for which she made about a two-minute appearance in closed session before being sent home by the board because she was ill. According to board member Karen Borges, Niehoff's evaluation will be discussed further at the March 22 meeting. On March 15 it was notification Niehoff may be out of a job when her contract expires June 30 that came as a surprise to her when she saw it on the agenda.

Maradian told *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting it is state

law that non-faculty members under contract must be given reduction in force notices by March 15 if there is a chance their contract will not be renewed.

“It is a notice that provides the board maximum flexibility,” Maradian said.

However, the college has not operated this way in the past.

Maradian said without this notification, both of their contracts would be automatically renewed for a year beginning July 1.

Now the board must tell Maradian and Niehoff by May 15 if they will still be getting a paycheck from LTCC after June 30.

As much as the board members who spoke to *LTN* mentioned the state budget being a factor in all of this, the truth is California’s budget won’t be passed by May 15. Nor would the three who spoke express whether this is solely about Niehoff or more about reorganizing the administrative team. The college has employed Niehoff since January 2010.

Maradian’s contract was always supposed to be for one year. The college is in the process of looking for a president. The selection committee plans to meet March 24 to narrow the applicants to 10 to be interviewed in April, with the board interviewing three to five finalists in May.

One of the issues regarding Niehoff’s evaluation, which has not been provided to *Lake Tahoe News* because it is a personnel issue, is the scope of it.

Per Board Policy, Chapter IV, Policy 4.25, “All new academic administrators will undergo comprehensive evaluation two consecutive years after appointment.”

Maradian denied that is the policy.

“Board policy on evaluations is that every three years you

have a comprehensive review and other reviews are annual reviews," Maradian said.

The policy clearly states he is wrong.

If Niehoff had been given a comprehensive review, it would have meant being evaluated not just by Maradian, but also several faculty, classified, adjunct and other administrators.

In effect, she has been denied her due process outlined in board policy. On top of that, Maradian did the annual evaluation even though he has only worked with her for six months.

What the board has to say

Board members Fritz Wenck, Mason and Borges spoke with *Lake Tahoe News* after the meeting. All believe Maradian is doing a good job and support the direction he is taking the South Lake Tahoe institution. Board member Kerry David did not return calls and Blann is out of town.

"I think Dr. Maradian has done an excellent job in the areas we asked him to work on," Wenck, the board president, said.

Those areas Wenck said are:

- Evaluating and implementing the Datatel system; (There is a relaunch of that program Thursday at 9am in the board room. The person running the program was let go in January per Maradian's recommendation.)
- Self-study for accreditation; (This must be done by June; with the site visit in October.)
- Possible reorganization of the administrative team.

"I know there is a lot of uncertainty on campus and that always creates not a good morale climate," Mason said. "We hope to bring in a new person as president ... that will be one

of their jobs, to help bring the campus together.”

None of the board members could or would pinpoint what has brought the college to the point of having employees send emails to *Lake Tahoe News* that say, “I believe Sue is clearly a target for retribution after having been a ‘whistle-blower’ against Steve. I wish I wasn’t such a chicken s–, but I can’t risk being similarly targeted in this job market. Sue is the best VP of Business we’ve had in over a decade. She deserves better.”

Borges and Mason did not hesitate to acknowledge morale is less than spectacular.

“I would say there is a lack of harmony. And we are trying to understand people’s points-of-view. We are trying to look into it and see what we can do,” Borges said.

She would not share what people on campus are saying to her.

“There is a climate on campus and people are afraid to speak in front of each other,” Mason said.

At the board meeting Tuesday only one person spoke – Denise Russell. But she has nothing to fear because her last day of managing the LTCC bookstore was March 10. She told the board there is a feeling of helplessness and hopelessness on campus.

“I don’t know if this is what you want – employees living in fear,” Russell told the board. “There are concerns about leadership.”

What Niehoff has to say

Though holiday lights may seem like an innocuous subject, it escalated into a heated exchange between the two college administrators that resulted in Niehoff writing a detailed memo to the board Nov. 29, 2010.

Mason and Borges remember the package of paperwork Niehoff

provided them, while Wenck has no recollection. In the stack of papers are emails between the interim president and vice president of Business Services, a summary of lawsuits filed against Maradian while employed elsewhere, and the three Los Angeles Superior Court decisions that mostly involve sexual harassment judgments against Maradian.

When asked why they hired someone with such a checkered past, Wenck said, "I don't know anything about it." Then he added, "There were some allegations, but the board did not feel they rose to such a point that it would deter him from doing the job."

Niehoff in her letter to the board four months ago, which they have never talked to her about according to her, says, "Dr. Maradian's pattern of abusive and hostile behavior shows up in several publically available court documents which date back to at least 1996. He is now continuing this pattern of behavior at LTCC. Several other employees can corroborate the hostile work environment he is creating for this college."

In a conversation with *Lake Tahoe News* after the March 15 meeting, Niehoff said, "When you look at him and listen he sounds articulate and engaged, but he clearly doesn't like to be challenged, to be questioned. The board doesn't see it because he has one personality for them and another on campus."

When asked to describe his relationship with Niehoff, Maradian said, "I don't describe personnel matters."

Niehoff said their relationship soured after she questioned the expense of holiday lights and the religious nature of them.

Apparently an exchange of emails went back and forth between the two last fall. Authority over the whole college versus responsibility for all fiscal matters is a large part of the dialogue. The escalation and tone of the emails is what led

Niehoff to write her letter to the board.

The board on Tuesday granted Niehoff permission to speak to them at the March 22 meeting in closed session. She wants it to be just her and the board, though Borges will be out of town.

Niehoff is considering her options. To begin with she still has a job and may be offered a contract to carry on her services. For now, she said she will do the job she was hired to do, but on July 1 she doesn't know where she will be.