

New South Shore recreation measure slides into first base

By Susan Wood

It may have the makings of a great novel – perceived sexism, money and the law.



Ballfields like the one on Rufus Allen Boulevard could be headed toward improvements if a new measure goes before voters in November. Photo/Susan Wood

A proposed measure to go before El Dorado County voters in November to fund recreation improvements for ball fields and bike trails as an altered version of Measure S passed its first hurdle with the city. And already, recreation alliances and competing forces have formed to vie for the coveted \$470,000 collected since the first recreation-oriented

initiative passed.

Essentially, the South Lake Tahoe Recreation Facilities Joint Powers Authority and recreation advocates would like to change the controversial Measure S that's been in effect for more than a decade. In 2009, advocates of ball field improvements tried to channel that money away from bicycle trails, but Measure B failed with only 62 percent of the vote. The ballot initiative needed a two-thirds vote.

Former City Councilman John Upton, the one staff person managing the finances of the JPA, got the approval from the city Tuesday to proceed to the next base but not before entering into an almost two-hour discussion on the preliminary ballot language.

The new language highlighting "Little League" fields came into question when a softball mom challenged the baseball-myopic group pushing the new measure to include the predominantly girls leagues.

And she had listeners in high places – namely City Councilwoman Angela Swanson, who had to remind the male dominated group speaking to the matter that girls have taken a second seat in sports for too many years pre- and post Title IX of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The federal law dictates the support of facilities for women's sports on an equal playing field with the men.

"By law, you have to bring the girls facilities up to the men," Marilyn Breisacher said. The softball mom watched her daughter grow up wondering why "her brother got to play on better fields." She doesn't want that to happen anymore.

On several occasions, she cited AB2404. enacted in 2005 and mandated for local governments five years later, making California the first state in the nation to enforce the civil rights of girls in community athletics as an institution in local jurisdictions and special districts.

Breisacher also took issue with the language singling out the field on Rufus Allen Boulevard at the former Al Tahoe Middle School where the Little League teams play as the one place getting the money for improvements such as batting cages, irrigation systems and a snack bar. She wants to see the improvements expanded to the South Tahoe Middle School field. Right now, Tahoe Valley Elementary is where the softball teams play.

When all was said and done, Upton pledged to broaden the language to read "baseball/softball" fields and deleted the specific reference to improvements at one particular ball field. Councilman Tom Davis repeatedly asked if the changes would meet the state bill requirements. To that, Breisacher nodded.

The \$6.5 million Measure S has turned out to be a hot-button issue in some circles because it was written in vague language to cover "ball fields." Even the specifics haven't always followed the letter of the law. The multipurpose field built next to Lake Tahoe Community College opened with much fanfare, but three were supposed to be constructed, and both baseball and soccer teams compete for playing time there. Softball leagues get bumped.

The intent of the new measure is to take the \$470,000 currently on the books and split it between ball field improvements and bicycle trail maintenance to routes built before Measure S passed. This current law now only allows the money to be spent on trails constructed after the measure passed. That's not many trails. Only eight of the anticipated 25 miles have been laid. The shortage created a cash-cow fund building at \$5,000 per year, per mile that the JPA collects from taxpayers on about 50,000 parcels to the tune of \$18 per year. The Measure lasts until 2030.

"I hate to see that money languish like this," Mayor Hal Cole said Tuesday.

Cycling advocates would like other trails to get much-needed maintenance in this pothole infested region.

Longtime cycling advocate Tom Wendell supports changing the law under this new proposed measure "in theory" because the effort appears more inclusive and covers more trails because many were built long before 2000. He couldn't say this about Measure S or even Measure B. He also takes issue with the money collected being called "excess" funds when they were clearly designed to go toward the maintenance of the area's dilapidated, broken trail system.

"We are in dire need. Those trails are bad," Wendell said Wednesday.

"We have fallen short in terms of meeting our obligations. We have to address in the end that the bike trails are getting a great deal of that money. There's no way on God's green Earth we are going to take that money for upkeep of the trails and give it (all) to the ball field people," said El Dorado County Supervisor Norma Santiago, who also serves on the JPA board consisting of the city, county and Tahoe Paradise Resort Improvement District run out of the park in Meyers.

Santiago has a history with Measure S. She ordered the complete audit of the funds in 2006, when it became clear the infrastructure it was designed to protect was in disrepair and a lot of money was being collected.

The county is expected to hear the proposal for the new measure in the next few weeks.

Then by May 5, the JPA will meet and determine whether it wants to cough up \$35,000 to support an election effort. The ballot measure's language must be finalized by the end of June to make the November ballot.