

Opinion: Now is the time for solutions, not stones

By Tony O'Rourke

In response to Mr. (Bill) Crawford's May 12, 2011, opinion piece in the *Lake Tahoe News* I would like to set the record straight.

It was grossly misleading of Mr. Crawford to state, "the city manager of South Lake Tahoe will advise the City Council to donate \$250,000 of city reserve funds to the school district for upgrading the football field at South Tahoe High School." Mr. Crawford further stated, "This is an example of undisciplined behavior by the city manager because the gift has nothing do with meeting the needs of the city."

First, the May 3 memorandum to the City Council on this matter clearly states that Dr. (Jim) Tarwater, superintendent of Lake Tahoe Unified School District, was scheduled to make a presentation requesting the City Council consider a contribution of \$250,000 toward the Viking Stadium and softball field improvements. Nowhere in the memo am I, as city manager, or any other member of the city staff recommending anything other than to hear Dr. Tarwater's presentation and consider his request. Furthermore, the item was postponed until June because the request required additional information and needed to be discussed in the broader context of the city's proposed five-year Capital Improvement Plan.



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In Mr. Crawford's own words, "The school district should run the district and the city should run the city ... *but there should be no free exchange of tax dollars.*" (emphasis added). I find it incredulous that Mr. Crawford would suggest the notion of a potential partnership between the city and school district as ill-advised" and "undisciplined behavior," yet as a council member Mr. Crawford repeatedly supported a partnership between the city and school district as exhibited by the following:

- Voted multiple times to support the school district financially, most recently in 2010 to spend \$52,913 for a South Lake Tahoe police officer to serve four days a week as a school resource officer at South Tahoe High School. The school district contributed \$52,105 for this "financial partnership."
- Voted to support the expenditure of \$28,000 for a land appraisal and master plan for a government center in partnership with the school district and El Dorado County.
- In 2009, voted to support the development and shared operating costs of a city-school district multipurpose room at South Tahoe High School.
- At the Feb. 6, 2007, City Council meeting, Mr. Crawford expressed his opinion of the importance of securing maintenance funding for the renovated athletic track and newly constructed soccer field at South Tahoe Middle School – the same track and soccer field for which the city had in 2006 contributed \$270,000 to the school district to build. At the February 2007 meeting Mr. Crawford stated, "this renovated facility should be available for all of the community." Now, Mr. Crawford criticizes simply the idea of considering the very kind of City-School District partnership he supported as a council member.

Mr. Crawford is correct, "The city can't fix the streets." During Mr. Crawford's tenure as City Council member virtually nothing was done to invest in city streets. In fact, the city last adopted a Capital Improvement Program in 1999.

By comparison, the current City Council in less than 100 days of service has:

- Right-sized the city organization through department consolidations, layoffs and early retirements saving the South Lake Tahoe taxpayers \$10.2 million over the next five years;
- Adopted a Strategic Plan that addresses and prioritizes the needs of the community for the next five years by focusing on Fiscal Sustainability, Economic Development, Improving the Built Environment, Improving Public Trust and Accountability, and Partnership Development;
- Adopted a five-year financial plan that eliminates a projected \$17 million budget shortfall over the next five years by right-sizing the city organization to live within its means and investing \$25 million in public roads, sidewalks, drainage, lighting and community facilities;
- Started developing the first Capital Improvement Plan since 1999 to improve streets, sidewalks, lights, bike paths and community facilities;
- Taken action to provide the public what the public has loudly indicated it wants, which includes better government, better streets and infrastructure, better facilities for youth and better partnerships among government agencies. In the December 2010 Citizen Survey, a mere 32 percent of residents indicated services for our youth were excellent or good and 81 percent rated community appearance and infrastructure as an essential or very important priority to address.

Ironically and unfortunately, when former Councilmember Crawford had the opportunity to put the city on a fiscally

prudent and sustainable course as the current City Council has done, he chose to use over \$5.2 million dollars in operating reserves in 2008, 2009 and 2010 largely for personnel costs to balance the city's budget rather than permanently right-sizing the city and investing in public infrastructure.

Mr. Crawford, please spare the public lectures on what is prudent or appropriate fiscal discipline. When Mr. Crawford had the opportunity to demonstrate fiscally prudent action, he chose to kick the can down the road.

Every citizen, every city employee, every City Council member in the wake of these financially challenging times must share part of the burden of saving our city. I publicly request Mr. Crawford to commit to finding constructive and positive solutions for our City and not merely sit on the sidelines and criticize those who are making the tough choices now, taking the heat now, for choices that could have been made years ago. These are times that require bold and innovative leadership, not carping from the bench.

Tony O'Rourke is city manager of South Lake Tahoe.