

Inertia plagues South Tahoe council regarding sign rules

By Kathryn Reed

What's another two hours of discussion about South Lake Tahoe's sign ordinance when it's been on the books for the past 15 years?

The problem is the issue wasn't resolved at 9:15pm Tuesday when the talking ended. The council directed staff to come back with revisions to the law. It may be October when the next round of jibber-jabber commences.



If South Tahoe creates a historical sign category, Sno-Flake may qualify.

Photo/LTN

This was a continuation of the June 29 workshop. And like that meeting, everyone agreed inconsistent enforcement is a big issue.

"It shouldn't take six to 12 months to enforce the sign ordinance," City Attorney Patrick Enright said. Streamlining that process is something staff has been directed to do.

At times the heart of the issue seemed lost two nights ago as council members nitpicked about whether the U.S. flag should be used as promotional material and whether garage sale signs are a nuisance. The irony being the flag isn't even addressed in the ordinance, as staff had to point out to the five during the July 26 evening workshop.

Councilman Bruce Grego's hang up was believing all signs will look alike, making for a homogenous setting.

What to do about historical signs like Sno-Flake and Stardust is also an issue yet to be resolved.

Hilary Hodges, Community Development director, said if business and property owners would use a bit of creativity, plenty of sign diversity would exist.

The main issue, though it didn't receive much attention until Councilwoman Angela Swanson made a passionate speech, is how to address the signs in the way of Caltrans' Highway 50 project from Trout Creek to Ski Run Boulevard.

Hodges said 31 non-conforming signs, with seven of them being multiple business signs, exist in that area.

Staff came up with an incentive plan where the city would fund partial replacement of freestanding signs in that section of town at a cost not to exceed \$138,000.

While no action was taken at the meeting, it appeared the council wants to move in that direction. But it was also stated they want funding to be available for everyone as the roadwork phases continue.

To improve the roads, and put in curbs, gutters and bike paths is means signs need to be moved out of the right-of-way. The city needs to decide if it is going to allow the signs to be put back in or force the compliance issue during road construction.

Is now the right time to mandate enforcement of signs – therefore creating an expense for businesses or property owners – or is waiting until the economy improves more prudent? Those are questions the council is wrestling with.

A freestanding sign can cost \$10,000.

The smaller issue, though the one that gets more attention, is the use of temporary signs. The council is leaning toward allowing sandwich boards and banners for special events and limited time periods.