

Report rips how SLTFD functions, says keep station 2

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe is not closing a fire station, even though the prospect of doing so has been discussed for several months. However, other changes besides personnel are in the works.



“The biggest risk is inadequate code education and enforcement. We need to be more diligent,” City Manager Tony O’Rourke said of his assessment of a study done on the city’s fire department.

ERASE Enterprises out of Texas has given the city a 27-page report based on its analysis of the operations of the South Lake Tahoe Fire Department. The report paints a picture of inefficiency, poor recordkeeping, shoddy supervision, a lack of emphasis on fire prevention, reserves being underutilized, and a need to review contracts for mutual aid, including the ambulance service.

The report has been disseminated to fire staff, with their comments on it expected to Chief Brian Uhler by the end of the week.

By Sept. 19, Uhler expects to have an action plan to deliver to O’Rourke.

“We know we are keeping station 2 up and running,” Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*.

O’Rourke originally contracted with the firm to assess the

operation of the station near South Tahoe Middle School. Part of the reason had to do with the number of calls the station responds to and part is the age of the building. The cost of the study was about \$12,000, which came out of the fire department's budget.

It was two years ago that then Fire Chief Lorenzo Gigliotti was looking at relocating station 2, as compared to the latest talk of doing away with the station. Right now the status quo will remain in regards to station facilities. However, the report says the city should, "Evaluate the ability to modify Fire Station #1 to accept Truck 2 or the construction of a new station at Al Tahoe Boulevard and Pioneer Trail with the sale of the property at Fire Stations #2 & #3."

Expect to see current Chief Uhler at more fires. That is another recommendation of the report – a chief of this size department that had just seven structure fires in 2010 should have the top guy at them. This was not the case.

"In fact, per the Unit Logs maintained by the dispatch center the Fire Chief only responded to 3 of the 42 actual fire related incidents in the City. In each case he did not respond with the initial response of emergency personnel," the report says. "His responses for the three incidents were 33 minutes, 50 minutes, and 1 hour and 26 minutes after the initial alarm. In a department of this size, the Fire Chief must be part of the initial response to all structure fires and specialized hazard incidents."

Dealing with people

"We have addressed some of issues like structural changes," O'Rourke said in regards hierarchy in the department.

For the time being Uhler has added fire chief to his police chief duties. That is expected to last about a year.

Though it won't be a done deal until the council approves the

budget this month (it could happen Thursday night), the working document does not have the three division chiefs on the payroll.

O'Rourke has previously said some of the nine captains will be given more responsibility.

However, some of these men are the ones who insiders said helped get themselves a 2 percent raise starting Oct. 1 by being the only employee group to reach a deal with the city, while at the same selling out their bosses – the division chiefs.

“It came down to a simple issue – close the station or reduce the administration,” Uhler said.

Uhler said the city's priority should be keeping the stations open with actual firefighters and paramedics on staff to reach the emergency.

If the division chiefs are let go, this means the fire marshal position is vacant. Policy had it that Lake Valley and South Tahoe's fire marshals filled in for each other. Lake Valley has a newbie at that position with the promotion of Gareth Harris to fire chief.

Uhler would not speak to how the fire marshal role will be handled in the future until a decision regarding the division chiefs has been made.

He did say, “We will promote some people into shift commander jobs.”

City looks like a firetrap

“Of serious concern was that the area visually observed as the most dangerous part of the community regarding unsafe fire conditions was exactly where most of the structure fires occurred per the data analysis! When you can drive around and via a ‘windshield inspection’ predict where the structure

fires will be you have an obvious lack of code enforcement," the report states.

It is the fire marshal and building inspector who are responsible for those types of code enforcement.

The report suggests creating an anti-arson program, and to look at state and federal funds to deal with blighted areas.

"During the initial data review, the site visit, and subsequent review of department records many other issues came to light which all impact the efficiency and effectiveness of the fire protection system for the city," the report says.

This is why the scope of the analysis grew beyond looking at if the city could do without station 2.

In all, 25 recommendations were brought forward. Uhler said some will be implemented, others won't. Until he gets feedback from the fire staff, he would not elaborate beyond what he had already said.

However, more complete reports are bound to be on the to-do list.

"To be able to rely on data to make critical management decisions the reports that the data is extracted from must be both valid and reliable. To achieve these two measures the reports must be completely filled out with valid data and the reporting methodology must be consistent and accurate, thereby being reliable. In our review we found reports that listed content damage but no property value, property loss with no property value listed, content loss without content value and so forth," the consults says in the report. "Other reports had no physical address shown (even for a wildfire a geographical address needs to be entered to complete the report) and on others we found numerous fires occurring at the same location but with different identifiers used to describe the same location. The lack of complete and accurate reports is an

issue that comes from both training and a lack of supervision.”

The report also wants the city’s money people to be more engaged.

Two recommendations are, “Re-evaluate all contracts for outside services with the City Finance Department reviewing actual costs for services versus fee structures in the contracts to ensure a positive cash flow outcome.

“[And] (e)valuate permit fees and stand by fees for the fire department to ensure that fee structure represents costs for the services.”