

# Runnels: District needs to shrink, reevaluate its budget

*Publisher's note: Lake Tahoe News is profiling the six candidates who will be on the Nov. 8 ballot for the South Tahoe Public Utility District board. They are being published in the order they were submitted. John Runnels is running for the seat vacated by Marylou Mosbacher.*

**Name:** John Wright Runnels

**Age:** 61

**How long have you lived on the South Shore?:** 40 years in August 2012

**What water company supplies your home? Your work?:** STPUD



John Runnels  
Photo/Ernie  
Claudio

**Job/profession?:** Business owner

**What stands out to you in the 2011-12 budget?:** The need to make internal adjustments to offset raising rates. Capital improvement projects need to be slowed down and departments that due to a lack of grant funding or fewer projects need to be eliminated or to have their budgets decreased. Also the funds allocated from lobbyists and consultants need to be

carefully scrutinized for their effectiveness and decreased or eliminated accordingly.

**What boards, commissions, or other experience, including volunteering, do you have?:** Since I came to the South Shore in the early '70s I have been involved in many city and county organizations working to improve our community. I have listed a few: Citizens Alliance for Responsible Government, president (SLT B.I.D. Elimination, "Fight The Blight" (keeping redevelopment in check), Lake Tahoe Boulevard 4 Lanes Not 2, Lake Tahoe Crime Watch, (past president) South Shore Lions Club, South Lake Tahoe Steering Committee for Police and Fire Salaries, Bicentennial for the U.S. Bill of Rights Citizens for Tahoe County (secretary), Supporters for the Protection of Individual Rights in Tahoe (S.P.I.R.I.T.) (past president).

**Is there any individual, group or organization you would not take campaign money from?:** I run a low dollar campaign, preferring to meet and talk with locals to find out their feelings on issues and any problems or areas that they feel need addressing, rather than spending a large amounts of money for ineffectual mailers, or advertising. I really don't think I will need to accept or deny contributions.

**What is the No. 1 reason someone should vote for you over another candidate?:** I am the best-educated and informed candidate. I have been preparing for this position since I applied to the district board to fill a board vacancy. I ran in 2007 and was narrowly defeated by the incumbent. In 2009, I ran again against another incumbent and again came in second out of four candidates. Since 2006, I have committed myself to learning as much about the district and its operations as I can. I have attended board meetings, committee meetings, workshops, public meetings, field trips, PUC meetings, Lukins Water Company meetings, El Dorado County Water Agency meetings and much more. I know the district and when elected I will step into the position with a background of knowledge and familiarity with the task at hand.

**California law mandates water meters be installed. What is your solution to make the fee equitable for those on meters and those without one?:** I do not think that an equitable or what feels like a fair fee is obtainable. I think that someone getting unlimited water for a fixed fee is always going to irritate those trying to conserve and paying for every cubic foot. I think the only solution is to use the figure arrived at by the consultants hired by the district in the interim and use every possible method short of rate increases to install the remainder of water meters ASAP to ensure equality among ratepayers.

**To get the remaining 60 percent of South Tahoe PUD customers on meters it will cost \$15 million. As a board member, where will you get the money to pay for the meters?:** I will give the installation of the remaining water meters priority, pursuing all federal and state funds when they become available again, slowing other capital improvement projects, and increasing efficiency within the water and sewer operations to free the maximum amount of dollars to accomplish this project in the shortest period of time without raising rates.

**Do you believe the district should spend money on lobbying efforts in Sacramento and/or Washington, D.C.? Why or why not?:** I believe that the STPUD's annual trips to Washington, D.C., to meet with aides that they could speak to by driving 100 miles to Sacramento has to stop. The same thing is accomplished in Sacramento and the savings to ratepayers is substantial. In the interest of transparency the district's travel and education expenses need to be examined to see if the costs incurred justify the costs to ratepayers. I also think that the expenditures on the district credit cards should be submitted in a listing of individual expenditures per card per user and open to the public on the payment of claims submitted at each board meeting.

**What do you know about STPUD getting money from the Lake Tahoe Restoration Act?:** The district has been receiving funds from

the Tahoe Restoration Act since the act was first passed following the Angora Fire. The funds have allowed, with the decreased cost of construction, for a great deal of infrastructure renewal and improvement within the district. However, due to the economy the funding has gone from \$2 million last year to \$500,000 this year and no further funds are anticipated until the economy improves or a new stimulus bill provides new funding. Also STPUD's ability to provide matching funds required by the majority of grants has been severely curtailed by the exhaustion of the MTBE settlement funds used in the past decade.

**How do you balance the economic situation of the community with the infrastructure needs of the district?:** STPUD exists to "serve" the ratepayers with clean water and removal of sewage. It has become used to a rate increase averaging 3-4 percent per year. This is a burden upon users, unfair, and unsustainable in this economy. The district has been living off the \$43 million settlement of the MTBE lawsuit which is all gone. This means that the district needs to shrink and reevaluate its budget. My knowledge of the district will allow me to immediately work with other Board members to improve efficiency, while maintaining existing infrastructure and holding rates at a reasonable level.

**With 38 percent of a customer's sewer bill going to meet the needs of the Porter-Cologne Water Quality Act and \$100 million already invested in Alpine County to take STPUD's wastewater, would you leave things as they are? If yes, why? If no, what would you change and how do you expect to accomplish those changes?:** As the Porter-Cologne Act is here to stay for the foreseeable future, every opportunity needs to be taken to recover more of the costs of exporting the recycled water. Already plans are under way for a hydroelectric generation plant on the downhill run to the district's Diamond Valley Ranch, which will produce electricity to be sold to Liberty Energy recovering some of the costs. Water is the single most

valuable resource in the Western states, its value and price are rising dramatically. In 2012, a provision in the contract the district has with the sox Alpine county ranches which currently use STPUD recycled water allows for renegotiation of the fees charged. As the value of water rises so should fees. I would also arbitrate for the construction of a pipeline to provide the option of the sale of this water to Nevada ranchers who have need of it and are willing to purchase it.

**What should be done with the land STPUD owns where the old post office was on Black Bart?:** Tear it down and transfer the coverage to the sewer plant. The cost of upgrading the structure to render it usable since it needs water and sewer service, insulation, etc., far exceeds the benefits it would return

**There has been a three-year wage freeze for employees. What are your thoughts on employee raises and benefits?:** I believe that employee salaries and benefits have been driven up beyond those of the community and ratepayers who pay the bills by consultants and salary comparison studies. I would find away to tie employee salaries and benefits to those received in our community.

**When would you vote for a hike on water and sewer rates and why?:** I will not categorically declare that I will not vote for rate increases, but I will promise that I will not vote for a rate increase unless the benefit to the ratepayers far exceeds the costs.

**Lukins Brothers Water District – any comments?:** Only get involved with it if it can be done with no cost to the ratepayers. Projected costs to upgrade the Lukins system to the current district and fire flow standards are \$20-25 million as a board member I could not in good conscience vote that kind of a burden on district ratepayers.

**What should be the main priority of South Tahoe PUD?:** To

provide sewage removal and clean water to ratepayers at a reasonable price.

**What should be the main priority of a South Tahoe PUD board member?:** To always remember the “Public” in STPUD. To operate for the ratepayers, considering the impact that the costs of services have upon them and strive to deliver quality services at the fairest price by maintaining efficiency and controlling expenditures.

**Tell readers something about yourself that most people don't know:** I love animals.