

Tahoe City crews moving out of 50-year-old fire station

By Katherine E. Hill

TAHOE CITY – Chief Duane Whitelaw’s eyes light up as he talks about the new, modern fire station being built on a hill above Tahoe City. The 22,000-square-foot facility spread over three levels is in stark contrast to the antiquated fire station that was built in 1961 for an all-volunteer fire department.

“Most facilities during that era were designed for people to drive in to the station” to respond to calls, says Whitelaw, who heads the North Tahoe Fire Protection District. “With growth and development in the district, we needed to take a more permanent approach to providing emergency services.”



North Tahoe Fire Chief Duane Whitelaw will move his crew into the new station by the end of the year.

Photos/Katherine E. Hill

The new Station 51, being called a public safety center rather than a fire station due to its multi-use design, has been

designed to meet the growing demands of the district, which stretches from Tahoe City to Alpine Meadows, Homewood and Kings Beach.

The center will not only house the fire department, it also will serve as the region's emergency command center in case of disasters.

One of the most important things about the new facility is its location – on Fairway Drive off Highway 89. The current station was built in the heart of Tahoe City. In the 50 years since it was built, Tahoe City has become a popular tourist destination, drawing a steady stream of pedestrian and automobile traffic through the small town year-round. In the summer, traffic is often at a crawl through Tahoe City, making for potentially dangerous conditions for firefighters to leave the station to respond to calls.

“We’ve outgrown the current building and it’s a real safety problem,” Whitelaw says.

Work has been progressing quickly on the station since construction began in May 2010, and it will be completed by the end of the year. The NTFPD financed the \$10 million cost for the project, which includes \$6 million for construction. The station has been designed to be a silver LEED building, which is an international system for green building. The station is being built using a mix of cement fiber board, metal, wood and plaster, and will use solar panels for hot water and to offset its energy use.

The new station features five bays, including room for a \$1.4 million aerial ladder truck that will be needed to respond to calls at taller structures in the works in the district including the proposed village at Homewood Mountain Resort, the affordable housing project under construction in Kings Beach, as well as the Kings Beach Town Center. There also are expanded administrative offices, conference rooms that will be

open for use by the public, and sleeping quarters, a fitness area, living room, dining room and kitchen for the fire crews that will be living at the station during their shifts. The new station also will be ADA accessible; the current station is not.

Station 51 crews average four to seven people per shift and respond to fire and medical emergencies, with 80 percent of their work devoted to medical calls, Whitelaw says. Firefighters, however, are cross trained to respond to fires, water rescues, forest fuel reductions such as the chipping program, and hazardous materials, as well.

Future of the old fire station

While work continues to complete the new facility by the end of the year, local officials are trying to decide what to do with the site of the current fire station. The station is part of the West Commons Beach area, which sits on a



The entrance to the new station.

bluff overlooking Commons Beach. The site includes the visitors' center and the Tahoe City Community Center, which is home to the North Tahoe Arts Center. Last week, officials unveiled four proposed alternatives for public use of the site that ranged from using the fire station's footprint for a park to razing all of the structures to build an interpretive center that would become a regional attraction.

“Our concerns were using the building for community uses,” TCPUD General Manager Cindy Gustafson said. “There are a wide range of opportunities that are nowhere near reality.”

The proposals presented raised concerns from many in the community who attended the meeting. People raised questions about the lack of on-site parking and concerns over the removal of the Community Center, which houses the only public art center in the North Tahoe-Truckee region.

Bill Briner, who has served in countless public offices through his decades residing in the region and was on the Placer County Board of Supervisors when the fire station was built, was most vocal in his opposition to any plan other than razing the fire station.

“We committed to tearing down the firehouse when they were done, and I don’t want to spoil it by building multi-story buildings,” Briner said. “That’s the whole idea of tearing the fire station down ... opening up the view.”

More than a dozen people in the audience applauded Briner’s call to open the view to Lake Tahoe. Since the fire station was built in 1961, however, landscaping with tall trees and brush on Commons Beach obscure a clear view of Lake Tahoe from the fire station site.

Briner also said he was opposed to any plans that would conflict with existing businesses in Tahoe City, citing three of the proposals that call for food and rental concessions.

The site on which the three structures were built was given to the “people of Tahoe City” by President Ulysses S Grant in 1872 and eventually became the responsibility of the Tahoe City Public Utility District. The Community Center was built in 1938 and the fire station in 1961.

When the new station was built, the fire district committed to tearing down the station once it no longer needed the

building, which spurred the need for local officials to address the future of the site. As well, neither the station nor the Community Center is ADA accessible. The Community Center also operates at a \$50,000 deficit each year and is in need of more than \$100,000 in repairs to the roof, siding and heating system.

A steering committee has been tasked to work with consultants to come up with proposals for the site and the project is being spearheaded by the TCPUD and the North Lake Tahoe Resort Association. The committee is made up of representatives from local government agencies, the fire district, the North Lake Tahoe Historical Society, U.S. Forest Service, California Tahoe Conservancy, California State Park and others.

The consultants presented four proposals for the site. All of the proposals call for razing the fire station and adding an elevator for ADA accessibility. None of the proposals calls for adding any additional parking to the site, but rather call for shuttle drop-off locations.

Plaza least costly

The first, and least costly, would be to demolish the station and visitors' center and to build a plaza on the fire station site, dubbed the Lake Welcome Plaza. The Community Center would be renovated and a new two-story addition built to house the visitors' center and expand exhibit space for the Arts Center. There also would be an ADA accessible path leading down to Commons Beach. It would cost between \$4 million and \$6 million.

Theater would serve community

A Community Center Plus option at \$7 million to \$8 million calls for renovating and expanding the Community Center into a multi-use facility that could house exhibit space and an interpretive center, as well as food and kayak and paddleboard concessions to offset operation costs. A basement level would

be added to provide space for the concessions. The fire station and visitors' center would be torn down and a 165-seat theater would be built to be used for performances, conferences and other uses.

The last two proposals take a different approach to the site, with options that would develop a destination attraction in Tahoe City to draw in tourists.

Tahoe Experience at pavilions

The third proposal calls for four enclosed pavilions connected by a center corridor to be built on the site dubbed as Tahoe Experience Pavilions at a cost of \$11 million to \$13 million. All of the existing buildings would be torn down and the Community Center could be relocated to another, unspecified location. The pavilions are inspired by the Tahoe City waterfront in 1900 and would provide space over three levels for exhibits, administrative offices, a store, multi-use facility, and food and rental concessions, with outdoor courtyards between each pavilion. The bottom floor would be situated at lakeside with Commons Beach.

Hydrarium most radical proposal

The fourth proposal, The Hydrarium, is the most costly and the calls for the most radical change for the site. At a price tag of \$23 million to \$25 million The Hydrarium concept calls for a four-story interpretive, state-of-the-art center that could attract hundreds of thousands of visitors each year to Tahoe City and be a revenue source, said Barry Howard, one of the project's consultants. The Hydrarium stands one story taller than the current structures on the site; the bottom level would be below street level at lakeside.

The modern, circular design of the build would provide exhibit space with interactive exhibits and a multi-use theater with Lake Tahoe as the central theme of the facility. There also would be space for food and rental concessions, and could

provide jobs in the community.

The steering committee passed out a community survey at the meeting, which also is available online, to get public feedback on the proposed alternatives before moving forward. The committee will likely meet within the next month to evaluate public input before deciding how to proceed, said Kelli Twomey, TCPUD spokesperson. The committee will also have to evaluate construction costs and potential funding sources before making any decisions, she said.

A video of the meeting, along with the community survey, will be available online this week, or call (530) 583.3796 for more information.