

South Tahoe parceling out fire marshal responsibilities

By Kathryn Reed

South Lake Tahoe Fire Department is the only agency in the Lake Tahoe Basin without a fire marshal. And there is no plan to have one again anytime soon.

This was the City Council's doing when the five approved the budget last fall that came with reorganization plans in the department. The reorg eliminated the three battalion chief positions, one of whom doubled as fire marshal.

When *Lake Tahoe News* asked the city to provide a job description of the fire marshal position, the response was, "We've never had a fire marshal job description."



The next time there is a fire in South Lake Tahoe, neither Ray Zachau, right, nor any staff fire marshal will be available for Chief Brian Uhler to call.

Photo/LTN file

Even though Ray Zachau has not been fire marshal since the end of 2011, his photo and job are still on the city's website. (Though it's possible the city will take it down when people read this.) No one has the job. That page says the fire marshal's job includes:

- Engine Company Occupancy Inspection Program
- Fire Investigation / Team Leader
- New Construction Inspections
- Occupancy Inspections
- Ordinance Development
- Permitting
- Plan Review
- Revenue Development
- School Curriculum
- State Inspections
- Wildland Fuel Reduction.

"We do not have an officially designated fire marshal," Fire Chief Brian Uhler said. "There are lower levels of certification that allow people to do business inspections and planned inspections. It doesn't require a full-blown fire marshal to do those inspections."

Uhler contends the residents of South Lake Tahoe are safe, that necessary inspections can be done by people in the department who have specific certifications that are recognized by the state, that others will be trained and that negotiations are under way with Lake Valley Fire Protection

District to handle the majority of South Tahoe's fire marshal needs.

Even though the elimination of the fire marshal position has been talked about for months and was known for months after the council voted to do so, a memorandum of understanding has yet to be drawn up between the two agencies.

Once the powers that be work out the language and terms, it will need to be approved by the South Lake Tahoe City Council and the Lake Valley board of directors.

Investigating fires is a large component of a fire marshal's job – something these lower level certifications don't empower an ordinary firefighter to do. This is why the MOU between the departments is necessary.

Lake Valley Fire Chief Gareth Harris is that department's former fire marshal. John Poell, who has been in the fire business for 20 years, is now Lake Valley's fire marshal.

"It's occurring frequently in our business, the consolidation of services," Harris told *Lake Tahoe News*. "The bottom line is we are all in this together to ensure the safety of our community."

Harris and Uhler are confident an agreement for Lake Valley to provide fire marshal services at a yet-to-be released level for a yet to be released price will be in place in the coming months.

"There is nothing that says a department has to have a fire marshal," Daniel Berlant told *Lake Tahoe News*. He works for CalFire – the state fire department that has some jurisdiction over local agencies. "The law says the fire chief will enforce fire and life safety codes. Then the fire chief can appoint a fire marshal or battalion chief to carry out those duties."

Berlant would not comment on the specifics of South Lake Tahoe

Fire Department having one person who has the title of fire chief and police chief (Uhler has no fire experience), a department with no battalion chiefs, and a department with no fire marshal.

Uhler is working with City Manager Tony O'Rourke on how best to structure the department. Uhler has also been getting input from the firefighters' union.

Uhler told *Lake Tahoe News*, "I received a letter (last week) from the association that there is a willingness to hire firefighters rather than a higher level administrative position. Maybe we will have two firefighters instead of an administrator to fill in the shifts that are short now. That negotiation process is under way."