

# Survey: Residents less than enamoured with South Tahoe

By Kathryn Reed

While the number of people who believe South Lake Tahoe is going in the correct direction increased by 50 percent in the most recent survey compared to the prior year, the majority of survey takers said the city is off track.



Partial results from the December citizen survey were just released. Twenty-two percent believe the city is on the right path. While that is a dismal percentage, the 2010 survey had 15 percent believing in what the city was doing.

This was the largest percentage increase in all the questions asked.

The goal of the annual survey that was started in 2010 is to ask residents and business owners a series of questions to find out how the city is doing in a number of areas. From there it is up to staff and the City Council to figure out how to improve on those numbers.

"We have to do a better job in the services we are delivering," City Manager Tony O'Rourke told *Lake Tahoe News*. "We need to focus less on ourselves and more on the public."

This was in response to 29 percent of respondents believing they get value for their tax dollars. That dropped two percentage points from 2010.

Forty-one percent of the people who were sent a survey filled it out – or 444 people. The 2010 survey had a 35 percent response rate. On things like this response rates usually

range between 25 percent and 40 percent.

Twenty-two questions were about the city, though many were multi-part. For example, under the question about the quality of services in South Lake Tahoe, 38 areas needed to be graded either excellent, good, fair, poor or don't know.

The highest rated city department was fire at 88 percent believing these men and women do a good job. However, garbage collection was at 92 percent – the top ranked entity. But garbage isn't even a city business; South Tahoe Refuse is a private company that contracts with the city.

"I'm going to make it a point to have these garbage guys visit our staff," O'Rourke said. "That is the type of customer service we want to obtain."

The worst area in the city is streets – with an approval rating of 14 percent. That is the same number from 2010.

Besides comparing the results from year-to-year, the city also puts itself up against other cities in the United States.

Out of 339 cities, garbage service in South Lake Tahoe is ranked eighth best. This compares to street repair that is No. 391 out of 400. That means people in nine other cities have a bumpier, more unpleasant experience than people here.

Snow removal, which is considered a core service, received a 63 percent good-excellent rating. Compared to other cities, South Tahoe is 108 out of 255.

O'Rourke wants to do what he can to make the number go higher. It's impossible to know if all the news about cutbacks to the department as well as last year's heavy snowfall that was not always plowed to residents' satisfaction contributed to the rating.

But it was up 3 percentage points from the previous year.

O'Rourke said he was alarmed with only 30 percent saying business service is good or excellent.

"We are ranked 156 out of 170 and we are a tourist destination where service should be our hallmark. That is a horrible story," O'Rourke said. "I think the public is critical, but not in an overly negative way. They call it like they see it."

Staff, as was done a year ago as well, was also surveyed. All those results will not be made public until employees hear the news first. However, O'Rourke said overall feelings "went from neutral to slightly negative."

"It seems like employees feel picked upon. But we have to be fiscally solvent before we are mother hens," O'Rourke said. "There is a nexus to what we do today and how it affects us down the road."

In coalescing all of this information the city also sought data from neighboring counties with the main goals to find out the percentage of employees who were let go in the last year, change to the pension and health care plans, and what the significant impacts were. South Lake Tahoe officials in this chart provide that information.

The citizen survey will most likely be discussed in full at the March 6 City Council meeting. It is slated to be released at that time as well. The council could make changes to the strategic and business plans that were adopted last year to incorporate any information from the survey.