

# Personalities, not policy dominate S. Tahoe council meeting

By Kathryn Reed

The South Lake Tahoe City Council should worry less about what lobbyist it has and instead hire a therapist to get them to play nice together.

## Analysis

In a testy show of unfriendliness, the five on Tuesday more overtly than at any other council meeting demonstrated a tremendous amount of hostility – mostly at each other. While the five should have opinions of their own, at the end of the day the majority vote rules. It's called democracy.

That is not to say 5-0 votes demonstrate democracy.



But for councilmembers to be acting in a rogue manner instead of being the voice of the entire council on the respective committees and board positions they sit on is not what they were elected to do.

While these councilmembers more so than others in the recent past have been good about giving reports at council meetings regarding the work they do elsewhere on behalf of the city, not everyone regularly reports back and some act on their own without the consent of the full council.

Mayor Claire Fortier attacked fellow councilmembers Tom Davis and Angela Swanson for what she called a lack of transparency

by these two. Those two are the city's Legislative Committee – or Leg Committee as it is commonly referred to.

Davis and Swanson lashed back, offended that Fortier questioned their personal and professional integrity. These two have regularly given updates to their colleagues, and therefore the public.

Davis said during the exchange, "I thought in closed session things were resolved."

This was in reference to an item discussed the morning of June 5 in closed session about the Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Regional Plan update. It was on the closed session agenda because of the threat of potential litigation – even though the Regional Plan has not been voted on and it's not the city that would be sued. Though the city could file a lawsuit, this is not likely. The TRPA won't even vote on the Regional Plan update until December at the earliest. Without knowing what exactly was discussed, it's impossible to know if this was a violation of California's open meeting law – the Brown Act – where there was dialog behind closed doors without the public being privy to some unknown threat of a lawsuit about something that hasn't even been approved. It appears to be a loosely veiled guise to be able to discuss things without the public being able to listen.

Councilmembers have told *Lake Tahoe News* that Fortier as the rep to the TRPA Governing Board has not been forthcoming until Tuesday about the intricacies of the Regional Plan update.

Fortier after the meeting said that's not true – she has been upfront with her colleagues.

"Not only am I updating the council, so is (Director of Development Services) Hilary (Roverud)," Fortier told *Lake Tahoe News*.

However, while Fortier has sat on the TRPA committee that came

up with the Regional Plan update, there has been no public discussion with the council as to what collectively the city of South Lake Tahoe wanted in the document. Fortier would report when the meetings were, but did not in open session say what was discussed. Those committee meetings were public and not held behind closed doors so she was legally able to discuss what was said.

While she wants in writing from the Leg Committee what their deliverables are, she has not put in writing information about her work on the Regional Plan committee.

Fortier used to be on the Leg Committee, and wanted to continue to be a rep, but was essentially voted off by her colleagues earlier this year because of her workload as mayor and being on the Governing Board.

The agenda item on June 5 that led to the heated exchange was about what to do with the two lobbying firms the city hired a year ago. In the end it was agreed on a 4-1 vote, with Fortier being the lone dissenter, to keep them on through the November election and then decide what to do.

In another sign of dysfunction, the city has opted not to meet with Douglas County. The two government bodies met in November, with the idea of having regular joint sessions to discuss matters on the South Shore. The loop road, among other things, was supposed to be discussed this month. That meeting has been nixed.

Fortier said it was Douglas County who canceled the meeting. She said she spoke to Lee Bonner, chair of the Douglas County Commission, and the concern was about the transition going on in the city with regard to City Manager Tony O'Rourke leaving.

"In talking with Douglas County Manager Steve Mokrohisky as well as with South Lake Tahoe Mayor Claire Fortier and (Councilman) Bruce Grego, the decision was made to postpone the meeting. With the TRPA Regional Plan update, Tahoe Summit,

SLT staff transition, and the need to conduct more public meetings on the South Shore Vision Plan, we felt it would be best to meet in late August," Bonner told *Lake Tahoe News*.

But the reality is the commissioners and council members are the ones who set policy. Staff is the same today as it will be when O'Rourke leaves at the end of the month. And the interim city manager, Nancy Kerry, is up to speed on all the issues.

As to whether Fortier will be leaving the council before her term ends, she was asked point blank on Tuesday by Davis what her intentions are.

"When I know, I will tell you," she responded.

Her spouse has accepted a job out of state.

In a lengthy conversation with *Lake Tahoe News* on Tuesday night, Fortier said it's not her ego that is keeping her on the council, but instead her commitment to the voters who elected her in November 2010.

"I am absolutely about what is for the better good of the city of South Lake Tahoe," Fortier said.

In part she defines this as meaning completing her term as mayor and shepherding the Regional Plan to a vote.

"I would like to see it completed so the city can succeed in rebuilding itself," Fortier said of the Regional Plan. She called this her "fundamental issue".

She does not believe she owes it to the more than 20,000 people she represents to tell them decisively if she will fulfill her four-year term or when she might leave before it expires in December 2014.

"I know what I need to accomplish to be an effective city councilman and an effective mayor," Fortier said. "My decisions on the City Council are not based on my spouse's

decisions, they are based on the things I'm committed to."