

Recreation, fire, revenues top S. Tahoe council's priorities

By Kathryn Reed

Raising revenue, including via taxes, which would fund recreation; dissecting the workings of the fire department; and prioritizing capital improvement projects dominated a nearly four-hour meeting Saturday of the South Lake Tahoe City Council.

The lively discussion among the five, along with the city manager and finance director, also touched on the future of the airport, what's going on with the concrete-rebar hole at Stateline, and how staff is overworked and keep having more work piled on.



South Lake Tahoe City Manager Nancy Kerry talks finances and priorities Aug. 11 with the council. Photo/Kathryn Reed

An irony was at the end of the meeting there was a discussion about how long the regular council meetings are. This took place in the fourth hour when the meeting was supposed to be three hours. Talking less was the emphasis – and being concise.

Suzie Alessi, city clerk, said more public praise and less public criticism of staff would go a long ways.

She is giving a workshop today to staff about efficient staff reports. That is one way meetings may be streamlined; by providing council the material they desire in the most logical manner.

Jim Boylan with Pathfinders Consulting of Carlsbad facilitated the meeting. His \$12,000 fee included the Aug. 11 workshop along with time spent with staff to elicit their thoughts, concerns and desires.

The overriding message is that no matter what the council sets as goals and priorities, the workload cannot increase based on current staffing levels. That is why council needs to finally make specific decisions, leave staff alone so they have time to actually get their work done and not waffle on policy decisions.

“The message is ‘we can provide core services and not much more’,” Boylan relayed to the council from staff. He explained how when council says something is routine business, it still consumes time and resources.

Boylan will cull all the information he has obtained into a report for the council and staff by the end of the month.

Only three members of the public attended the meeting. One was City Council candidate JoAnn Conner – no other candidates were in attendance other than the incumbents.

Future of recreation

The council agreed a recreation master plan needs to be developed.

Then in 2014 the voters are likely to be asked to increase the hotel tax and institute an amusement-entertainment tax. These sources of revenue would then fund the recreation plan.

Most of the council agreed increasing taxes to merely fill the general fund is not what they or their constituents want.

Fire department issues

Councilman Tom Davis is most concerned about outdated equipment.

Even though negotiations are under way with Lake Valley Fire Protection District regarding consolidation of the departments, the county entity has not backed down from mandating that the city have functioning equipment to bring to the table.

Staff is an issue for South Lake. An unsafe structure exists now because the incident commander doubles as someone working the scene, too.

What to do with the aging Station 2 will be explored.

Looking at how Lake Tahoe Community College wants to expand the fire academy, fire science program and build physical resources could affect what the city does.

Mayor Claire Fortier said in six months she expects to have a "holistic views of the fire department." She said with that knowledge it will better drive the budget discussion about this department, too.

Nearly 50 percent of the city's entire budget is allocated for public safety – police and fire. It was pointed out by City Manager Nancy Kerry and reiterated by councilmembers that the cities filing for bankruptcy in California sacrificed other departments for public safety so that at some point revenue-generating sections were essentially non-existent. Kerry said South Lake Tahoe is on the edge and needs to be aware of this as priorities are decided.

From the midyear revision of the current budget to what is projected for the next fiscal year that begins Oct. 1, fire is

the only department to have its expenses increase. Part of this is reflected in the recent hiring of three firefighters and programmed raises. Firefighters were given a raise last year because they were the first to come to the table to agree to other budget cuts.

Other items

- Aug. 30 is the date to settle the dispute with Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board regarding the stormwater permit. South Lake Tahoe's stance is that it does not have the money to do everything Lahontan is mandating. This ties into the city figuring out its priorities. Out of four items related to that permit, it can comply with a quarter.
- Harrison Avenue is near the top of the list of things to get done.
- Staff will be asked to present to council how much work it will take to go forward with the Stateline and Tahoe Valley area plans that would need to be completed in an updated Tahoe Regional Planning Agency Regional Plan. Then council will decide which to pursue first. Transportation, including the Loop Road, would be part of the Stateline discussion.
- An area-by-area paid parking plan will be brought back to the council. (In the working budget for 2012-13 is \$150,000 from paid parking.)
- Council at its Aug. 7 meeting agreed to have someone go after the unpaid transient occupancy tax. This remains a priority, with a conservative estimate of net revenues of \$50,000 in the next fiscal year.
- A capital plan for equipment replacement will be devised.
- Fortier and Councilwoman Angela Swanson will form the subcommittee to work with Kerry to formulate a collaborative approach to getting projects in the ground regionally.

- The council may broach Douglas County commissioners when the two elected bodies meet Oct. 23 about having them pay to help keep Lake Tahoe Airport open. There is a precedent for this.
- If all employees don't agree to a 2 percent pay cut, more layoffs are inevitable. This is to cope with the nearly \$1 million budget deficit.
- The council wants a future workshop to discuss the airport, decide if a request for proposal to privatize the airport should go out, what to do regarding the settlement agreement, and look at land uses for that area.
- The council would like movement on the rebar-concrete that was once going to be a convention center. Bill Owens of Owens Financial is working on a plan that would divvy up some of the area, but nothing has been solidified.