

# Cole: Get rid of blight, be less divisive, increase recreation

**Publisher's note:** *This is the last of five Q&A profiles of a South Lake Tahoe City Council candidate running in the Nov. 6 election.*

**Name:** Hal Cole

**Age:** 63

**How long have you lived in South Lake Tahoe?:** 52 years



Hal Cole

**Work/volunteer experience:** I have owned and operated a successful construction company for over 35 years. I have also served on the City Council, Barton Hospital board of directors, Governing Board of the TRPA and CTC and sat on the city Planning Commission.

**Why are you running for City Council?:** I love this community and have dedicated the past 20 years to serving in any way I can. I believe my experience and institutional knowledge can be of great benefit as we face the challenges ahead.

**What is your vision for South Lake Tahoe, the South Shore and the entire Lake Tahoe Basin?:** To truly be a world-class destination resort. In order to accomplish that we must begin

serious work on restoring the near shore waters, encourage private investment to help rebuild our infrastructure, make a concerted effort to improve and market our recreational opportunities and build a spirit of partnership within our community.

**What are the three best things about South Lake Tahoe?:** The sheer beauty of it all, the changing seasons and the feeling of community a small town affords.

**What three things would you like to change in South Lake Tahoe and how will you go about changing them?:**

1. Encourage the demolition of the blighted buildings lining Highway 50.

Solution: Offer more options for their use and consequently their value. This can be done by changing the restrictions put on the property by the TRPA. For example, if you own a motel and want to remodel or transfer its use to another property, your only option is to build another motel or apartment. If we want to encourage the development of our commercial centers such as the Y, we must allow the freedom to transfer existing development out of areas where they are not profitable and into areas we are trying to develop. Whether the new use is a motel or commercial should be determined by the market and not a document created by bureaucrats.

2. Reduce the divisiveness in our community.

Solution: I think we are making progress. There is more community outreach lately. The city is going into neighborhoods and holding local meetings to get more focused input. Our City Council meetings encourage participation and our council members are open to new ideas. We need less criticism and more participation.

3. I would like to see more emphasis put on recreation for our infrastructure development and our marketing.

Solution: Develop a recreation master plan as I elaborate later.

**What would you do to balance the budget?:** Probably a more pertinent question would be, "What have you done to balance the budget?" First, a little background. In 2002, when our economy was booming and our revenues were growing, our city had no money in reserve. I was part of the council that decided to build a cash reserve. By 2009 we had close to \$14 million. On advice from economic advisors, we also adopted a policy that we would always retain at least 25 percent of our annual operating budget in reserve, enough to run the city for three months. 2008-09 was also the first budget year that the impact of the recession was fully felt. Prior to 2008, we were receiving approximately \$30 million in general fund revenues. Today we are getting close to \$28 million. To compound matters, our expenses were rising. Two years ago we were facing a \$5 million deficit. Today that has been reduced to \$500,000 and next budget year (2013-14) we expect to present a balanced budget. This was accomplished a number of ways. Over the past four years we have reduced our labor force by 30 percent (from management to line employees) while minimizing the impact on our core services (police, fire and snow removal). Our employees are now paying their full share of their retirement and we revamped our health insurance. This kind of downsizing is unheard of in the state and could not have been done without having a reserve in place to soften the blow to our community and employees. Property tax revenues have not yet bottomed out, but the slide has slowed and usually the property tax collected lags the economy in general. Our sales tax and TOT are above our projections; signaling what I believe to be the start of a long, slow recovery. While we were reducing expenses, we have been investing money into our infrastructure as seen by Lakeview Commons, the Bonanza Community Park, repaving of our streets and the planned improvements to Harrison Avenue – all of which should enhance our visitors' experience and restore some of

our residents' faith in the future.

**What would you like to see in a recreation master plan?:** I would like to see both private and public providers from both states develop the plan with an emphasis on identifying unmet needs and creating recreation programs that can be bundled and marketed (i.e. skiing and ice skating, youth camps, canoeing and guided hiking, etc.)

**Promoting recreation was touted two years as a means to stimulate the local economy. Nothing has been done in that time. What will you do so that same sentence can't be said two years from now?:** First of all I strongly disagree with the statement, "Nothing has been done". The planning and construction of Lakeview Commons is arguably the single biggest recreation project the city has done since the ice rink. We are seeing locals and tourists alike flocking to the beach. Families are enjoying the water, we have hosted paddling events, we have boat launching and canoe rentals. We are in the process of using unspent recreation JPA funds to improve our bike trails and ball fields. I cannot think of a time when we were as focused as we are now on recreation. Recreation is what will define Tahoe's future.

**What types of recreation do you enjoy in Lake Tahoe?:** Tennis in the summer, skiing in the winter.

**How will South Lake Tahoe be different in four years after the end of your term?:** The TRPA Regional Plan will have been adopted and the city will have an approved plan for the Y, incentivizing new investment. We will have continuous sidewalks and bike trail from the Y to Stateline. We will be well on our way for the development of the "56 acres" (the property across highway 50 from Lakeview Commons). Edgewood will be near completion of their project. Harrison Avenue will have a complete renovation complementing Lakeview Commons. Community pride is infectious. Business and homeowners alike will invest in their property.

**Being on the council requires working with four others. Give readers an example of how you work well others in difficult situations with differing opinions:** I have always prided myself in my ability to listen. I do not like to weigh in on issues until I have heard all sides. The most recent example is the Loop Road. The council heard hours of testimony and was divided on how to proceed. I proposed reopening the process and bringing forward other alternatives to be considered when preparing the environmental documents. Since then we have had a much more open dialogue and I do believe the final outcome will be embraced by a larger majority of our community.

**What are your opinions about the following issues and/or entities?:**

- **Loop road** – The option proposed was developed in a vacuum. The concern of affected businesses needs to be addressed. Other options need to be considered. Improvements to Highway 50 at Stateline are essential and we need to make sure the investment gives us the most benefit.

- **Hole at Stateline** – The City Council made a huge mistake when they approved the permit in 2007 and allowed the developer to go ahead with only the foundation, with no timetable or financing to complete the project. They also did not require that the property be consolidated into five parcels as required in the development agreement. The consequence has been catastrophic. The foundation now covers most of the 29 separate lots. Any potential buyers have to negotiate with separate lot owners making it impossible to make a single offer. The city has two potential options: take control of the property with eminent domain (something I don't think any future council will ever do) and market the project or begin abatement action declaring the site a health and safety issue.

- **Tahoe Valley Plan** – This is a prime example of how the TRPA stifles our ability to plan our own community. We spent years

on the process. We formed a committee of local businesses and residents and created a vision of what we wanted to see at the Y. I worked with our assistant city manager to codify the various elements of the plan. Our City Council formally approved it. The TRPA then told us that they would not consider any more community plans until they adopted the broader Regional Plan update. Three years later it still has not happened.

- **Giving money to any chamber or tourism bureau** – I have always felt that there is a partnership between the city and the chambers and LTVA. Our pledge was that we would invest in the infrastructure to attract visitors, fill our lodging and shop at our stores as evidenced by the Gondola Village, the ice rink, Lakeview Commons, etc. We have spent millions of dollars on these improvements, often in lieu of other services. In return, we hoped the tourist industry would invest in the marketing of our product. The city cannot afford to do both.

- **Benefits, including pensions, for city staff** – As I mentioned earlier, our employees have agreed through their bargaining units to pay their full share of the retirement (PERS) and have agreed, albeit not without much discomfort, to the revamping of our health insurance. We are one of the few cities in the state of California to achieve such concessions.

- **Tahoe Regional Planning Agency** – For me this issue is a double-edged sword. I was living here as a young child in the early '60s and saw how clear our waters and how unspoiled our beaches were. Left unchecked, unbridled development could have had an even more serious impact. On the other hand, the only way to improve our built and natural environment is to rebuild what is here. The TRPA has done a terrible job at recognizing this and reducing the barriers preventing the redevelopment of our town.

- **Lahontan Regional Water Quality Control Board** – Again, the

goals are lofty, but the reality is slapping us with unfunded mandates that we will never be able to afford. I feel that many times environmental agencies take the “all or nothing” approach. Either comply with all their regulations or be hit with fines or barriers to development. I believe that a small step in the right direction is better than standing still.

- **South Shore Vision Plan** – I have seen many visions and plans presented over the years and they usually fall flat due to lack of financial resources. This plan is the most comprehensive I have seen and one that is likely to proceed. I support it. I vocally offered one suggestion at our joint meeting with Douglas County, and that was lake access is still not fully addressed. Shuttling people to a dropping off point and then having them board a waterborne shuttle to the beach is not the best answer. We need easy to ride shuttles to take them from their lodging to the water. We must realize that they are visiting “Lake Tahoe” and it needs to be all about the lake.

- **Lake Tahoe Airport** – This is one of our most underutilized assets. For certain an airport could not have been built post TRPA. It is here – let’s take advantage of it. It has shown its value when our forests are on fire, and it offers an alternative for our visitors to travel here. It has also proven to be an effective alternative for housing our city offices.

**Why should voters vote for you over someone else?:** We are still in critical times. Running a city like ours requires many skill sets (i.e. police, fire, road maintenance, recreation, land use planning, budgeting, etc.). There are many people who are relatively new to the city and in very critical positions and I believe I offer the balance needed between new ideas and experience.

**What is your relationship to Community Athletic Coordinating Council and is being on the recreation joint powers authority**

**a conflict of interest for you?:** I have no affiliation with the C.A.C.C.

**Four years ago you said the Tahoe Valley Plan would be done by now. It isn't. Any comment?:** Yes, as I mentioned earlier, the city did its due diligence in preparing the plan. It was the TRPA that was unwilling to review it.

**Is there a person or business you would not take a campaign contribution from?:** I will not accept any contributions from anyone in return for any promises. I am fiercely independent and over the years I'm sure I have made some decisions that have disappointed people who are my most ardent supporters and at times have voted in support of my harshest critics. I have always voted my conscience and always will.

**Tell readers something about yourself that they may not already know:** Since my early adulthood I have been distrustful and critical of government. I still am. That is the main reason I entered politics.